

Varying the difficulty of test items

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the practice of varying the difficulty of test items in educational measurement. An item difficulty framework comprising concepts such as content difficulty, stimulus difficulty, task difficulty and expected response difficulty is introduced. The paper concludes with some suggestions on how to vary the difficulty of test items.

Summary – categories of degrees of challenge:

CONTENT/CONCEPT DIFFICULTY
Difficulty in subject matter, topic or conceptual knowledge , difficulty exists in the academic and conceptual demands that questions make.
STIMULUS DIFFICULTY
Difficulty of the linguistic features of the question (linguistic complexity) and the challenge in reading questions and understand the information or 'text' or source material .
TASK DIFFICULTY
Difficulty that candidates confront when they try to formulate or produce an answer .
EXPECTED RESPONSE DIFFICULTY
Difficulty imposed by examiners in a mark scheme and memorandum , more applicable to 'constructed' response questions, as opposed to 'selected' response questions (such as multiple choice, matching/true-false).