Evaluation

# Dmesure: a readability formula for French as a foreign language





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### Plan

- Introduction : readability for ICALL
- What is readability?
- Methodological steps
- Evaluation
- 5 Perspectives for future research
- 6 References



### Plan

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### Context

Introduction

- The sector of foreign language teaching is growing and changing:
  - There is a will to optimize the costs of education while improving its quality
  - The number of professionals is insufficient relative to demand.
  - Learners want more flexibility in teaching methods (timetable, place...).

ICALL has been viewed as a solution to these issues through the development of self-learning software.



## Contribution of ICALL

- For teachers, ICTs provide access to authentic language and real communication situation :
  - Automatic retrieval of texts on the web
  - Allow interaction with people from other cultures
- ICTs also help relieve teachers of repetitive tasks :
  - Automated design of exercises aimed at the assimilation of specific linguistic forms (such as collocation, grammar notion...) through repetition.



# Two kind of applications

#### Automated design of exercises based on a corpus

- French: ALEXIA [Chanier and Selva, 2000];
   ALFALEX [Selva, 2002, Verlinde et al., 2003];
   MIRTO [Antoniadis and Ponton, 2004, Antoniadis et al., 2005].
- English: Cloze tests [Coniam, 1997, Brown et al., 2005];
   WERTI [Amaral et al., 2006]; VISL [Bick, 2001]

Web crawlers for the automatic retrieval of web texts on a specific topic and at a specific readability level

- French:?
- English: IR4LL [Ott, 2009]; REAP [Heilman et al., 2008b], READ-X
   [Miltsakaki and Troutt, 2008]



# Generation of exercises : an example

#### ALFALEX

[Selva, 2002, Verlinde et al., 2003]

- Automated design of exercises on morphology, gender, collocations...
- Difficulty of the task: 2 levels
- Difficulty of the context is not controlled!
   It depends on the level of the corpus used.
- http://www.kuleuven.be/alfalex/



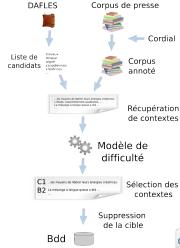
# An example of this contextual complexity

	Exercice de morphologie
	Completez les phrases en accordant les mots en italiques en fin de phrase
	La forme à complèter est nécessairement différente du mot donné en fin de phrase.  ATTENTION: le nombre de phrasses disponibles est limité à 33. Si vous désires faire des exercices supplémentaires sur la morphologie (avec d'autres exemples), voir FAQ sur la page d'accueil.
1 Il faut choisir la bonne, {doux}	une musique instrumentaleet non pas des airo <mark>tapageurs.</mark> *
2 * Autour de la petite pr essence, s'enthousiasme (maternel)	oste rénovée sont venus s'adjoindre la mairie, l'office de tourisme, un <mark>secrétanat mutualisé</mark> , l'école un médecin et un dentiste, demain une pompe à Brighte Fargeveelle.
3 Sa préfé (copain)	ire parler de "l'ambiance incroyable" qui régnait dans le <mark>cabaret.</mark>
4 La rude vie du petit <mark>sé</mark> ( <i>oeil</i> )	minaire. Jes copains, la découverte des filles et les longues discussions avec une jeune novice) ui ouvrent les sur les incertitudes de sa vocation.
5 Mais le couple le plus : ( <i>malin</i> )	attachant est ceiui qui réunit un grand Black bourré d'humour et une petite Hollandaise
6 Opération de séduction (las)	n, sans doute, mais qui reflète à l'évidence les aspirations d'une société de la l'érule des ayatollahs.
7 Les aus {rugbyman}	traliens ont <mark> disputé</mark> la première rencontre de leur tournés.
8 Mais l'essentiel pour S secteurs-clés. { capital }	ingapour est de préserver son secteur des services qui représente 70 % du PIB et de continuer à attirer les etle savoir faire dans un certain nombre d



# Readability model as a solution

- We can control two aspects :
  - Difficulty of the task : already taken into consideration (2 levels)
  - Contextual difficulty using a difficulty model (see figure)





## Retrieval of web texts: an example for EFL

#### REAP

[Heilman et al., 2008b, Collins-Thompson and Callan, 2004]

- REAding-specific Practice aims at improving reading comprehension abilities through practice.
- It integrates a SVM thematic classifier
- Difficulty is checked using the readability formulas described in [Collins-Thompson and Callan, 2005, Heilman et al., 2008a]
- http://reap.cs.cmu.edu/



Texte



## Readability: an example

Introduction

#### Grammar-based Reading Difficulty Prediction

#### Grade level predicted: 12.0

Accuracy generally improves with text length. The software will provide estimates for texts of any length, but a minimum length of 30 words is recommended. Also, the system is generally more accurate for grade levels above 2.

Type or paste your text into the box below and press "Submit" to obtain an estimate of the difficulty of your text.

A narrow grave-yard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city, seen from the windows of a gloomy-looking inn, is at no time an object of enlivening suggestion, and the spectacle is not at its best when the mouldy tombstones and funereal umbrage have received the infectable intensiment of a dul, most sown fall. B, while the air to thickened by this firstly drize, the calendar received the middle state of the control of a dul, most sown fall. B, while the air to thickened by this firstly drize, the calendar influence is absent from the scene.

Submit

Submit

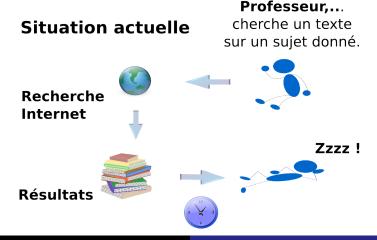
An estimation of the readability of the first lines of *The Europeans* (H.James). It has been assessed by the model of [Heilman et al., 2007].

Url: http://boston.lti.cs.cmu.edu/demos/readability/index.php



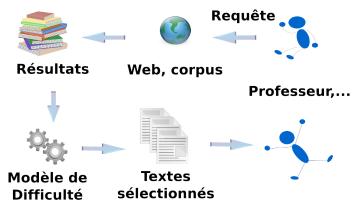
### Retrieval of web texts for FFL

Beyond search engines, there is no tool available for FFL.



# Why a difficulty model would be interesting

# Amélioration





# Difficulty model: a definition

Introduction

### Strictly speaking, a model for contextual difficulty in FFL:

- Amounts to assess the reading complexity of a text fragment for a FFL learner
  - What is reading in a foreign language?
  - What good is it to read when learning a L2?
- It is an issue better known as readability.
  - What is a readability formula?
  - What previous work exist?
  - What should be the characteristics of a readability formula specific to L2 reading?



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### **Definitions**

Introduction

### Readability can be defined as:

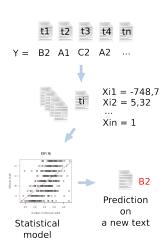
The sum total (including the interactions) of all those elements within a given piece of printed material that affect the success of a group of readers have with it. The success is the extent to which they understand it, read it at a optimal speed, and find it interesting. [Dale and Chall, 1949, 1]

Par lisibilité, nous désignons le degré de difficulté éprouvé par un lecteur essayant de comprendre un texte. [Henry, 1975]



# Conception of a formula : methodological steps

- Collect a corpus of texts whose difficulty has been measured using a criterion such as comprehension tests or cloze tests
- Define a list of linguistic predictors of the difficulty, such as sentence length or lexical load
- Design a statistical model (traditionally linear regression) based on the above features and corpus
- Validate the model





## Some trends in the field

Introduction

### Readability is mostly a Anglo-Saxon field :

- First formulas appeared in the US: they considered only the lexicon.
   [Lively and Pressey, 1923, Vogel and Washburne, 1928]
- Classic formulae: they are based on linear regression and only 2 predictors (one lexical, one syntactic)
   [Flesch. 1948. Dale and Chall. 1948]
- The revolution of the cloze test: more complex formulae appeared as well as the first computational efforts.
   [Smith and Senter, 1967, Bormuth, 1966, Bormuth, 1969]
- The cognitive area corresponds to a critique of the classical formulae, unable take into consideration some more semantic aspects (coherence, cohesion...)
   [Kintsch and Vipond, 1979, Kemper, 1983]



### Situation for French

Introduction

#### There are few studies about French L1:

- Some formulae for English were used with small adjustements [Kandel and Moles, 1958, de Landsheere, 1963]
- A few specific formulae for French L1 were coined [Henry, 1975, Richaudeau, 1979, Mesnager, 1989]

#### There are even fewer about FFL:

- Previous work : [Cornaire, 1985, Uitdenbogerd, 2005]
- Our first model: [François, 2009a, François, 2009b]

#### Conclusion

There is indeed a real need for such a model



# How to improve the existing

Introduction

### Using NLP and Data Mining techniques

- Provides a better coverage for the formula, since the corpus is bigger
- New statistical algorithm should better model the relations between difficulty and text characteristics
- NLP tools allow to model more complex variables, such as semantic ones, that could not be taken into consideration into previous automated formulae

### Building on theoretical contributions from cognitive psychology

- Studies aiming at defining the reading process may help discovering new difficulty predictors
- Others focusing on the distinction between L1 and L2 reading help developping a model specific to L2 reading
- Reading studies make apparent the limitations of readability formulae





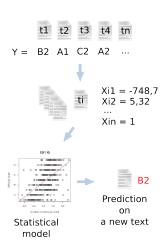
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# Collecting the corpus

#### Goal

Collect a corpus labelled by reading-difficulty levels, which implies :

- agreement on the difficulty scale, and
- the use of a criterion to assess the level of each text.

### The classic approach

- The criterion: tests (comprehension or cloze tests...) are applied on a population.
- The scale of measurement: is a quantitative one: percentages corresponding to the average achievement tests. However, they are often transformed into a grade level scale.



# My own approach

#### The needs

- The NLP perspective of readability requires a large number of texts
- The scale of measurement should have a practical interpretation

#### A solution

- Since 2001, the difficulty level of FFL textbooks has to be expressed in the "Common European Framework of Reference" scale.
- It is then possible to use FFL textbooks as a source of labelled texts.
- The difficulty-level of a text corresponds to the textbook level it comes from...
- This scale is immediately usable by FFL teachers



## The CEFR scale

- It has 6 levels :
   A1 (easier), A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 (higher)
- Some authors / teachers recommend to refine the scale by dividing certain levels :

```
Then, we also used a 9-levels scale: A1 (easier), A1+, A2, A2+, B1, B1+, B2, C1, and C2 (higher)
```

 This division can better take into account differences in skills for learners of lower levels, where they are more pronounced than in the upper levels.



# Criteria for selecting texts

Obviously, it is not possible to use all textbooks as corpus, nor all texts

#### Criteria

- Textbooks should be posterior to 2001
- The public target should be adults and young people.
- Textbooks for general purposes (we excluded the FFL for specific purposes textbooks)
- Inside the selected textbooks, only texts associated with a task of reading comprehension were kept



### Why?

- In modern textbooks using the actional approach, it happens to meet a complicated text that is associated with a simpler task. Eq. : RP LM = -731 (at level A1, where the mean = -700)
- On the opposite, it happens to meet a simple text that is associated with a complex task (eg. a song at the B2 level)
- In both case, it seems that our assumption (level of the text = level of the textbook) may not hold.

#### Some solutions

- Currently, outliers are suppressed.
- We are planning to check manually for such cases
- Creation of a less noisy corpus (using Dmesure)





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# Difficulty predictors

- Lexical predictors (4) :
  - Language models (LM1, LM2, LM3)
  - Mean number of letters per word (NLM)
- Syntactical predictors (12) :
  - Mean number of words per sentence (NMP)
  - 11 binary variables: tense and mood
- Dialogue variables (5) :

They aim to determine whether the text is a dialog or not



References

# Why a language model?

#### Theoretical foundation

Various studies in psycholinguistics suggest an association between the difficulty of words and their frequency

[Howes and Solomon, 1951, Brysbaert et al., 2000]

### The classic approach

They use a percentage of words absent from a list of the most frequent words of the language (Thorndike's, Dale's or Gougenheim's)

[Dale and Chall, 1948, Henry, 1975]

### The language model

A smoothed unigram model may be used advantageously instead of these lists [Collins-Thompson and Callan, 2005]





### LM: which is the best token unit?

### Which is the best unit for the unigram model in French?

- lemma (LM1)
- inflected forms (LM2)
- inflected forms (LM3) disambiguated using TreeTagger [Schmid, 1994]

**Results**: The correlations with the "difficulty" are similar

Unit	LM1	LM2	LM3
Correlation (r)	-0,58	-0,58	-0,59



# Syntactical predictors

List of 11 binary variables selected :

Conditional Future Imperative Imperfect Infinitive Past participle Present participle Present Subjunctive imperfect Subjunctive imperfect

- Objective : model the pace of teaching grammar in a context of FLE
- Optimal approach : automatic recognition of grammatical structures
- Problem: syntactic parsers for French are still lacking precision and slow. Therefore, we opted for this simplified parameterization.



#### **Assumption**

Dialogues are easier to read and understand than narratives, instructional or scientific texts.

⇒ lexicon and syntactical structures are simplier; topic are closer to everyday life [Dolch, 1948, Flesch, 1948, Gunning, 1952, Henry, 1975]

#### Selected variables:

- Proportion of personal pronoun of dialogue (1P, 2P)
- Ratio of interjection on the number of words
- Ratio of "!" and "?" on the number of following punctuation marks (!?.)
- Ratio of "!" and "?" on the number of these punctuation marks (!?.;:)
- Presence of quotation marks for dialogue



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## Statistical models used

 Regression models: they depends on the type of the dependant variable

Continuous ⇒ Linear regression

Ordinal ⇒ Proportional odds model (PO)

Categorical ⇒ Multinomial logistic regression (MLR)

- Models based on decision trees :
  - Classification tree (baseline) [Breiman et al., 1984]
  - Boosting [Freund and Schapire, 1996]
  - Bagging [Breiman, 1996]
- Support Vector Machines [Boser et al., 1992]



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#### 2 scales of measurement = 2 datasets :

- 6-levels model : an i.i.d sample (Corp6) of 299 texts of the corpus
- 9-levels model: an i.i.d sample (Corp9) of 449 texts of the corpus

#### **Outliers**

Here, an outlier is defined as an observation located more than three standard deviations away from the average of its class.

- ⇒ Corp6 : 11 outliers (remains 288 texts)
- ⇒ Corp9 : 12 outliers (remains 437 texts)



# Two evaluation procedures

Introduction

 The features selection: we used a stepwise selection based on the Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC):

$$AIC = -2 * log-likelihood + 2k$$

where k = number of parameters in the model

- Ten-fold cross-validation : estimation of the model performance on new data were evaluated through 3 measures :
  - Multiple correlation coefficient (R)
  - Accuracy
  - Adjacent Accuracy: proportions of predictions that were within one level of the human-assigned level for the given text [Heilman et al., 2008a]



- Stepwise selection process is sensitive to variations of the model and training data
- Selected variables for some models :
  - Proportional odds model :
    - Corp6 : ML1 + ML3 + NMP + PPD + PI + PPEI1 + BINGUI + Futur + Impf + Infi + PPasse + Subp
    - Corp9: ML3 + NMP + PPD + PPEI2 + BINGUI + Cond + Futur + Impf + Infi + PPasse + Pres + Subp
  - Multinomial regression model :
    - Corp6 : ML1 + NLM + NMP + BINGUI + Futur + Impf + Infi + PasseSim
    - Corp9: ML2 + ML3 + NMP + PPD + PPEI1 + Cond + Futur + Impf + PPasse + Subi + Subp

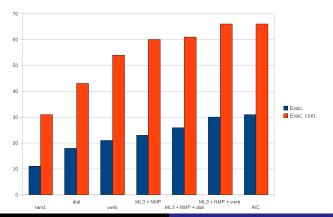


# Relative importance of the features

Introduction

However, we often finds two lexical variables and NMP: they form the basis of the formula.

Example of decomposition of the accuracy:

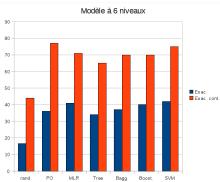


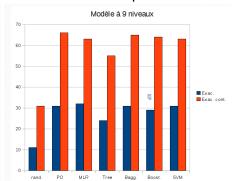


# Comparison of the models

Introduction

#### Results from the 10-folds cross-validation on both corpus :







#### Other similar studies

#### On French L1 :

 $\Rightarrow$  For a 5-classes problem : R = 0.64; Acc. and Adj. Acc. are not reported

[Collins-Thompson and Callan, 2005]

#### On English L1 :

⇒ For a 12-classes problem: R = 0.64 (grades 1-6) and 0.79 (grades 7-12); Acc. and Adj. Acc. are not reported
 [Collins-Thompson and Callan, 2005]

#### On English L2:

 $\Rightarrow$  For a 12-classes problem : R = 0.773 (PO) and 0,582 (MLR) ; Adj. Acc. = 52% (PO) and 45% (MLR) [Heilman et al., 2008a]



#### First conclusions

Introduction

- It is the first specific formula for FFL that uses a NLP approach (and one of the few for FFL)
  - $\Rightarrow$  The corpus includes a variety of text types, ensuring a wider coverage to the formula
- The criterion used (level of the textbooks according to the CEFR scale) seems questionable: the noise in the corpus can cause a poor learning.
- Our experiments suggest the (slight) superiority of SVM and logistic regression, a technique which is less demanding than the first.
- Optimizing the statistical aspects do not seem very useful for future improvements.

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#### 3 main lines of research

Introduction

#### Statistical optimization

- Multilayer neural networks
- Using reject option

#### New features

 Experimenting with new variables, or from the literature, either drawing on current work on the reading process

#### Reducing the noise in the corpus

- Using a manual exploration of the present corpus
- Collecting a new one, whose texts have been validated by teachers and learners



## Plan

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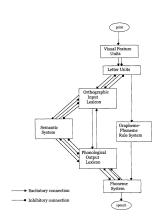
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# The reading process

# Reading is seen as a series of cognitive operations, here summarized as:

- Visual feature analysis: the eyes move to capture the words on the page
- Word recognition: activity specific to reading that is to recover the meaning of words in memory
- Comprehension (share the same brain network for written and oral): information extraction from the text and integration in long-term memory



Dual-route cascade model

[Coltheart et al., 2001]



# Reading process and readability

#### Hypothesis

The textual elements that slow or hinder these processes can be considered as sources of difficulty, such as:

- Familiarity with words: frequency or age of acquisition (= 1st appearance in FFL textbooks?)
- Imageability (more or less equivalent to the level of concreteness of words)
- Redundancy rate (TTR failure, N-gram?)
- Number of different meanings for a word (faciliting effect or not?)
- Degree of correspondence between the written and phonetic form
- ...



#### An observation

Reading processes in L1 and L2 differ. Therefore, the readability formulas should take into account these differences.

#### L1 reading: fluency in spoken language pre-exists

- Learn to read = develop a system of correspondences between graphemes and phonemes [Rayner et al., 2001]
- While the importance of decoding is crucial for beginners, it is understanding that prevails for the advanced reader
- Therefore, formulae based on lexical features should be more suitable for beginners, while structural of cognitive factors are better predictors for advanced learners [Chall and Dale, 1995]



References

# Differences between L1 and L2 reading

#### L2 reading

- Reader must learn the language while they "learn" to read in L2.
- Conversely, he has already more concepts and knowledge about the world [Koda, 2005]
- There are some interferences with existing structures [Bernhardt, 2003]

#### Consequences on readability

- Before a given threshold, the student is severely handicapped by his lack of language skills in L2: lexicon and syntax are predominant [Alderson, 1984]
- Beyond that threshold, he may transfer its reading skills from its L1 to its L2.
   Then, the importance of structural and cognitive factors increases again.
- Interferences with the mother tongue must also be considered, especially through the cognates [Laroche, 1979]





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Dmesure: a new tool for readability

# Dmesure: the alpha version





# Dmesure: 2 goals

Dmesure (stands for Difficulté Mesure) aims at the 2 following objectives:

Evaluation

- Provide a free tool helping FFL teachers in the use of the web as a corpus for finding teaching materials
- Provide a web 2.0 plateform where teachers can participate in assessing the difficulty of texts they have collected through DMeasure and they have used in their teaching



Dmesure: a new tool for readability

Introduction

## Dmesure: the one-text interface

	Dmesure
Dmesure vous off de français langue	re également trois méthodes pour analyser directement un texte et en évaluer le niveau de difficulté à la lecture (sur l'échelle du CECR) pour un apprenant é étrangère :
Sélectionner	la finesse de l'échelle : ○ Échelle à 6 niveaux ® Échelle à 9 niveaux
Copier-colle	r le texte dans le champ de saisie ci-dessous :
	ESSAGE. SALTS MOS forwards one may be 1 Likes conjected.  In Indicate Cape on 1 Likes conjected soon may be 1 Likes conjected soon on the 1 Likes conjected
Charger un t	exte depuis votre ordinateur : Parcourir
Indiquer l'UF	RL d'un site internet :
	Estimer la difficulté
	Centre de tratement automatique du lancage (CENTAL)

This text comes from the textbook Panorama (A2, p.159)



Dmesure: a new tool for readability

Introduction

## Dmesure: the one-text interface

Difficulté estimée :

Votre texte :

Etudier, suivre une formation dans un pays de l'Union européenne.

Un étudiant d'un pays de l'Union européenne peut suivre une formation professionnelle ou des études préparant à une professionnelle.

Professi

Centre de traitement automatique du langage (CENTAL)
Collège Erasme, 1 place Blaise Pascal, 8-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgique)
Contact : dmesure@uclouvain.be

Terminé

The model did well on that one!!





## Dmesure: web search service

Brothersher un teide.   Introduire un teide   Alde   Connesion
Dmesure
Difficult
Termes de recherche : réchauffement climatique Recherche avancée
Difficulté du texte : □ A1 □ A2 □ B1 ※ B2 ※ C1 ※ C2 ※ Utiliser 9 niveaux
Rechercher
Centre de trabiement automatique du larquige (CENTAL) Collège Eszeme, 1 Jacob Bissor Possco, B-1348 (Louvair-le-Heuve (Bisgraper) College Eszeme, 1 Jacob Bissor Possco, B-1348 (Louvair-le-Heuve (Bisgraper) College (Eszeme)
Terminé



Dmesure: a new tool for readability

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### Dmesure: web search service





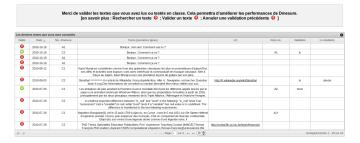
Dmesure: a new tool for readability

Introduction

#### Dmesure: the teacher interface

Rechercher un texte. | Introduire un texte | Aide | Valider un texte | Connecté : bebert | Déconnecion

# Dimesure



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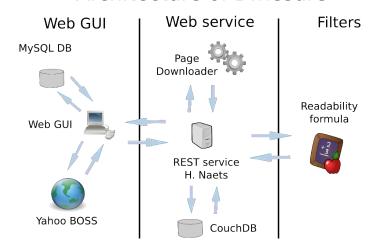
Contact : dmesure@uclouvain.be





## Dmesure: the architecture

## Architecture of Dmesure





# Dmesure: Some preliminary remarks

- While still needing to be debugged, the architecture seems suited to the task
- The one-text interface already gives good results, but the web search tool gives very poor predictions
- This is explained by the nature of text data found on the web. More work must be done on:
  - Cleaning the boilerplate
  - Checking the language correctness
  - Adaptating the readability model to this specific task (some predictors are better suited to the web environment



Dmesure: a new tool for readability

## The end

Introduction

Difficulté estimée : A2 0

**Votre texte :** Merci pour votre attention.

Sachez que les questions

et les commentaires sont les bienvenus :-)



#### Plan

Introduction

- Introduction : readability for ICALL
- 2 What is readability?
- Methodological steps
  - The corpus
  - Difficulty factors
  - The statistical models
- 4 Evaluation
- Perspectives for future research
  - Studies about the reading process
  - Dmesure: a new tool for readability
- References



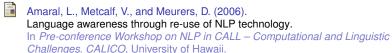
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