How does enlarging asterisks make web forms easier to fill in for older people?

Whilst web forms are crucial in most of our daily interactions with the web, ranging from setting up an e-mail account to booking a flight, very little is known about how to design more accessible web forms for older people (60+), despite an increasing ageing population and growing web accessibility research with them.

A pilot study conducted with a handful of older people indicated that standard asterisks did not help them to distinguish between required and optional fields, resulting in older people being unable to fill in forms independently (i.e. without relying on anyone else).

Drawing on this study, and on selective attention research in ageing, modified versions of widely used forms (Hotmail and Yahoo, e-mail; Vueling, booking flights online) were created, in which standard asterisks were replaced with one of three alternatives: large asterisks (double standard size), textual labels and a simple binary classification of fields. 88 older novice computer users participated in this study, which was conducted in several old-age pensioner associations in Barcelona.

The quantitative results were independent of the type of form and showed that the method of denoting required fields had a statistically significant effect on the number of errors, which was measured as required fields not filled. The participants made fewer errors in the binary classification than in the others, while the differences between standard asterisks, large asterisks and labels were not statistically significant. Conversations with the participants during and after the study revealed that they reported feeling overloaded with information when using every method except the binary classification.

Whereas one of the most widespread design solutions for older people is to enlarge the size of icons and text, how does it increase web forms accessibility for them? The results of this paper suggest that reducing selective attention demands can help us meet their accessibility needs more effectively than ‘making things bigger’.