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## TITLE

### Features of discourse and lexical richness at different performance levels in the Aptis speaking test

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This is a summary of a report by Noriko Iwashita, Lyn May and Paul Moore as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see [www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/](http://www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/)

#### WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

This study looked into candidates' performance at the level of discourse, as well as aspects of vocabulary use, on the Aptis speaking test, a computer-based test of spoken English language proficiency. The study aimed to identify whether candidates' use of discourse features and vocabulary varied, both across levels of performance and across the four tasks which make up the Aptis speaking test.

Most theories of second language proficiency highlight the importance of spoken discourse competence, or the ability to create and understand unified spoken 'texts', above the level of the individual utterances. While there has been much research into the complexity, accuracy and fluency of test candidates' performance on speaking tests, there has been less research into their performance at the level of discourse, including aspects of cohesion and coherence. Cohesion is generally understood to be the effective use of conjunctions, reference, and lexical choices which create linguistic and semantic links between utterances in a spoken text, while coherence relates to the perception of connectedness of a text, from both the listener's and speaker's perspective, incorporating the logical sequencing of utterances to achieve a communicative purpose in a specific context, as well as aspects of cohesion.

#### HOW WE DID IT:

We analysed 83 audio-recorded and transcribed speech samples of the four APTIS Speaking tasks focusing on selected aspects of cohesion and coherence, using both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Quantitative analysis involved use of the computational tool Coh-Metrix to measure features of cohesion across levels and tasks. This was followed by qualitative analyses of the same features of cohesion and the generic structure of test-taker performances, informed by the multimedia prompts, and rater scores and comments.

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### WHAT WE FOUND:

The analysis revealed that some features of discourse were more distinctively observed in the higher level test-taker performance than lower level test-takers, but other features were not clearly distinctive across levels. Test candidates used some discourse markers more frequently in more cognitively demanding tasks, which required them to compare the information given in two prompts, than in less demanding tasks in which candidates responded to questions. Some differences in other cohesion and coherence devices were observed according to different task type. In interpreting our findings, we propose that there was a possible effect of the task context (i.e., online delivery) on task performance. The study also provides insights into what constitutes spoken language performance at the various levels of performance on the Aptis test.