
Investigating the discourse produced at score levels B2.2 to C2 on the Aptis Advanced writing test

This is a summary of a report by Ute Knoch, Jason Fan, Cathie Elder, Ksenia Zhao and Andrew Pitman as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. See the full report at: www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

Differentiating between advanced L2 writers at the higher levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) presents a challenge for language testers given the relatively slight differences in the descriptors for these levels and the fact that higher-level performances are often differentiated based on rhetorical skills and expression of complex ideas which may be less well understood or defined. Developers of advanced writing proficiency tests who reference these upper levels of the CEFR face the daunting task of developing rating criteria which discriminate between levels in the absence of both explicit guidance from the CEFR and substantial research targeting the later stages of L2 writing development.

In this study, we explored the features of test-takers' writing samples on the two tasks in the Aptis Advanced writing test, that is, email response and website, that distinguish the three levels of B2.2, C1 and C2 on the CEFR.

Specifically, this project investigated the following two research questions:

1. What discourse features distinguish writing score levels at the upper end of the CEFR scale (i.e., B2.2, C1 and C2)?
2. Do any of these features relate to specific Aptis Advanced tasks?

HOW WE DID IT:

To address the two research questions, we adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, consisting of a qualitative and quantitative component. During the qualitative phase of this project, we conducted focus groups with ESL experts (n = 5) and Aptis raters (n = 6) where they were shown test-takers' writing samples at the three CEFR levels in focus and discussed the features that tended to distinguish these writing samples by levels. In addition, we asked the same participants to write comments on the discourse features of email and website writing samples across the three levels. During the quantitative phase, we performed discourse analysis of the email and website writing samples across the three levels (n = 120).

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The discourse features that we included in our analysis were informed by the findings that emerged from the focus group study, as well as some previous discourse analysis studies. The qualitative data was thematically analysed, and the quantitative data was subject to both descriptive and inferential analysis procedures.

WHAT WE FOUND:

Regarding the email response task, the two groups of participants identified five discourse features that tended to distinguish writing samples at the three levels: a) vocabulary and grammar; b) sociolinguistic features; c) content; d) cohesion and coherence; and e) orthographic control. Most of these findings, however, were not supported by the discourse analysis results which indicated that the email writing samples at the three levels in focus failed to demonstrate significantly different discourse features. When it comes to the website task, very similar findings emerged from the focus groups with the two groups of participants. However, the discourse analysis results indicated that except for lexical sophistication and spelling errors, other discourse features did not distinguish the writing samples at the three levels in focus.

The findings of this study are not entirely surprising, given that: a) the differences in writing samples at advanced levels are often nuanced and not easily quantifiable through discourse analysis; and b) the writing samples that we drew on in this study were evaluated by the Aptis raters using the existing rating criteria which lack details at high levels.

In view of the findings of this study, we provide a few recommendations for the possible revisions of the rating scales for the two tasks in the Aptis Advanced writing test. For example, for the email response task, we suggest incorporating some sociolinguistic features in the rating scale such as the appropriate use of openings and closings, and the politeness of the response. For the website task, features such as audience awareness and the appropriate use of source materials could be better reflected in the rating scale.