

# **Lexical and Discourse Characteristics of GEPT Speaking Test Performance Across Different Levels: A Corpus Linguistic Approach**

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## **Abstract**

Despite recent increases in studies investigating test-taker discourse, the relationship between the distinctive lexico-grammatical patterns and discourse competence of the test-taker performance and the scores awarded is not well understood, especially for region-specific GEPT tests results. This study therefore examined the distinguishing lexical and discourse features of performance that characterize test-taker discourse in GEPT speaking tests across score levels of Taiwanese GEPT test takers. The data that form the basis of this study were collected from 60 test-taker performances in the high-intermediate GEPT speaking test, corresponding to the four score levels (i.e., Levels 2, 3, 4 and 5). The findings show a significant increase in lexical richness from Level 2 to 5, while no difference was found in complexity. Cohesion was analyzed by examining the use of reference, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, showing that the overall frequencies of the above three features increase with candidate score levels. In particular, candidates at higher levels (Levels 4 and 5) were better able to accurately use references and their antecedents. They also tended to use a higher frequency of additive conjunctions and repetition to promote lexical cohesion. The generic structures in their text were more coherent, where they were better able to structure their speech and comply with the expected text structure. While more complex patterns appeared frequently in higher-level candidates' discourse, the theme-reiteration/constant theme patterns were only observed in Level 2. These findings indicate that in many aspects of discourse competence, candidates at higher score levels tend to implement better strategies on cohesive and coherence devices. These research findings illustrate how lexical richness and discourse competence are demonstrated in speaking performances by Taiwanese EFL learners across score levels. Pedagogical implications for language teaching and learning are also discussed.