



Student Performance Q&A:

2009 AP® Japanese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP® Japanese Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Laurel Rasplica Rodd of the University of Colorado in Boulder. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Interpersonal Writing Task: Text Chat

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluates writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated exchange of text-chat messages. It comprises a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic and six messages to which the student responds. Each message consists of a chat entry in Japanese and a brief direction in English, which provides guidance on how to answer. Students have 90 seconds to read the message and respond at each turn in the conversation. Each of the six responses receives a holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; all six scores count equally in calculating the total score.

The 2009 exam directed students to participate in an exchange of text-chat messages with a classmate, Yumi Watanabe, about their group presentation on Japanese culture. Students were asked to describe the aspect of Japanese culture they find most interesting, to justify their opinion, to recommend methods of presentation, to suggest a time and place to meet, and to suggest what should be brought to the meeting.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 16.02 out of a possible 36 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 19.97. Most students were able to perform the task relatively well.

* The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Japanese at home or who have lived for one month or more in a country where Japanese is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students did not understand or seemed to forget that the context of the conversation, established in the first prompt, was planning for a group presentation on Japanese culture in which they would be participating. Some students had difficulty describing the example of Japanese culture they were recommending for the presentation or justifying their opinion about why it would be a good topic for a group presentation. Others used only simple declarative sentences to give reasons or make suggestions and did not use grammatical forms that typically mark the speech functions of explanation or suggestion, such as the conjunction *から* or verb endings *たらいいと思* *う* or *ましよう/よう*.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Remind students that they should read very carefully the instructions on how to respond, and they should *respond as fully and appropriately as possible each time* it is their turn. They should write as much as possible in response to each prompt and not be content with a minimal answer. They should keep in mind the context of the text chat and be sure all their responses are relevant to that context. It is important that students pay careful attention to the English instructions that accompany each of the interlocutor's written comments. In this particular text chat, the instructions were to "describe a specific example," "justify your opinion," "give some examples," and "give some suggestions" in response to Yumi Watanabe's text messages. Some students provided minimal responses that did not follow these instructions and therefore did not fully address the prompt. Teachers should give students exercises that involve written exchanges, to help them become more familiar with the various syntactical structures that can be used to fulfill the instructions given in the prompt.

Students should be reminded to choose a register and a speech style that are appropriate to the context and the interlocutor. This year's task allowed some choice in register that could be considered appropriate: either the informal (plain) style used by the interlocutor or the more formal *です/ます* style could be seen as appropriate, depending on how well the student was imagined to know the interlocutor.

Students should be given regular opportunities to type Japanese so they will become comfortable switching between hiragana and katakana, converting to kanji when appropriate, and producing geminate consonants and the kana *ん* and *ん* correctly. Additionally, correct use of Japanese punctuation is important for facilitating readability.

Presentational Writing Task: Compare and Contrast Article

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write an article for the student newspaper of a school in Japan. It comprises a single prompt, which identifies two related topics and details how they should be discussed in the article. Students are given 20 minutes to write an article of 300–400 characters or longer. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task.

In 2009 students were asked to compare and contrast watching a movie at home and watching a movie in a movie theater. They were asked to describe at least three aspects of each and to highlight the similarities and differences. They were also asked to state their preference and give reasons for it.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.36 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.01. The task proved moderately challenging for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students did not include all the required elements in their response: introduction and conclusion, three aspects of comparison, and expression of preference and reasoning. Although many students used *しかし* and *でも*, they would have benefited from having learned additional phrases, such as *まず*、*最初に*、*つぎに*、*最後に*、*けつろんとして*、and so on. Failure to use complex structures (e.g., relative clauses, comparative structures, and explanatory phrases) appropriately often marred students' presentational writing and detracted from the impression of ease of expression. Many students used a limited range of conjunctions and transitional elements. Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms sometimes led to repetition of basic and common vocabulary (often inappropriately) or to interference from another language. However, for the most part, students were able to use a variety of grammatical and syntactical structures appropriately in their articles about watching a movie.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students should be reminded to carefully read and address all aspects of a prompt in their responses and to use at least the specified number of characters. Taking time to outline ideas before beginning to write helps students organize their thoughts and structure their articles clearly and logically. Teachers should spend time helping students learn appropriate ways to introduce and summarize a topic and guiding students in practicing various ways of organizing and connecting ideas into paragraph-length discourse.

Teachers should encourage continued expansion of their students' repertoires of vocabulary, idioms, and grammatical structures, which will help students achieve natural, easily flowing expression. Students also need practice in using a range of appropriate conjunctions, cohesive devices, and transitional elements. Correct use of Japanese punctuation is important for facilitating readability.

Students should practice appropriate article layout: indenting the first line of each paragraph is important in helping Exam Readers understand the flow of an article. Students should not leave spaces between words, although leaving an extra line between paragraphs may be helpful in guiding Readers through the article.

Teachers should ensure their students understand that to convert kanji from hiragana, they should hit the space bar after they have typed the complete word or phrase, not while they are in the middle of typing it. Students should also be reminded to carefully read and confirm the computer conversions they have selected. Students should be given regular opportunities to type Japanese so they will become comfortable switching between hiragana and katakana and converting to kanji correctly when appropriate.

Interpersonal Speaking Task: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluates speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated conversation. It comprises a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic and four questions. Students have 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the four responses receives a holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; all four scores count equally in calculating the total score.

The task on the 2009 exam directed students to engage in a conversation with Misaki Saito, a new foreign exchange student, about their school. Students were expected to respond to her request that they inform her about the school, to recommend whether she should take math or science, to recommend a club activity that would allow her to make friends, and to respond to her suggestion that they eat lunch together in the cafeteria the next day.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 13.25 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 16.13. This task proved to be somewhat challenging for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students had difficulty in responding to Misaki Saito's request that they provide her with information about their school. Some responded with specifics about their Japanese class, for example, rather than giving information about the school that would be of use to a new exchange student. The task was designed to elicit conversational responses, but some students provided only a basic response and did not attempt to elaborate by, for example, explaining the reason for their response, giving additional examples, suggesting alternatives, and so on. Students sometimes responded to only one part of the prompt or to just one phrase within it, rather than to the entire prompt.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Teachers should remind students that they should read very carefully the instructions on how to respond, and they should *respond as fully and appropriately as possible* each time it is their turn. They should say as much as possible in response to each prompt and not be content with a brief, though appropriate, answer. Students should always keep in mind the context of the conversation so they can provide relevant responses. They should remember who the interlocutor is and choose the appropriate register and style of speech for that person. Students should practice using and responding to set phrases (greetings, apologies, expressions of appreciation, expressions of gratitude, etc.) until the phrases become automatic, and they should also practice elaborating appropriately when using a variety of levels of discourse. Teachers should train their students to use the typical Japanese hesitation sounds (such as あのう or えーと) rather than *um* or *uh*, which will help students produce more natural conversation.

Presentational Speaking Task: Cultural Perspective Presentation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses students' speaking skills in the presentational communicative mode by requiring them to make a presentation on a cultural topic to a Japanese class. It consists of a single prompt, which identifies a cultural topic and details how it should be discussed in the presentation. Students are given 4 minutes to prepare the presentation and 2 minutes for its delivery. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; in addition to language skills, the score reflects the cultural knowledge exhibited in the response.

The 2009 exam directed students to present their view or perspective on Japanese foods. They were to begin with an appropriate introduction, discuss at least five aspects or examples of Japanese foods, explain their views or perspectives about them, and end with a concluding remark.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.57 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.27. The task proved to be of moderate difficulty.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Making a presentation that addressed all aspects of the prompt—including providing an introduction and conclusion, discussing five examples or aspects of Japanese foods, and explaining views or preferences—proved challenging. Many students produced incomplete responses, addressed the topic of Japanese foods only superficially, or gave inaccurate information. Some students merely listed foods and talked about their own likes and dislikes, rather than discussing the topic of Japanese foods in a way that would highlight their knowledge of Japanese culture and their own view or perspective on Japanese foods. A few students did not focus on Japanese foods but rather on table manners or other topics. Other common errors included a lack of organization and missing transitional elements. The absence of appropriate cohesive devices from sentence to sentence sometimes led to the presentation of scattershot bits of information.

Additional difficulties included the lack of a rich vocabulary and idioms and the inability to correctly produce complex sentences. A few students were unable to sustain the appropriate register and level of speech for an oral presentation.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students should be reminded to address the requirements of the prompt directly and to outline their ideas before beginning to speak to ensure that they address all aspects of the prompt in an organized oral presentation. Students need more than superficial exposure to many aspects of Japanese culture, as well as many opportunities to practice describing those Japanese cultural products, practices, and perspectives and expressing their own opinions about them. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to practice structuring their oral presentations with appropriate introductory and concluding remarks. They also need practice in using a variety of transitional elements and cohesive devices appropriately, using a range of sentence structures, and building from simple to complex sentences. Practice in using Japanese hesitation sounds (such as あのう or えーと) and in using different words to summarize or restate what they have already said will help students produce more natural-sounding, flowing speech.