



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® Japanese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP® Japanese Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Sufumi So of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. 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 evaluated writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated exchange of text-chat messages with a student, Yuko Fujita, in Japan. It comprised a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic and six messages to which the student responded. Students were asked to describe a specific example of an event at their school, tell when the event takes place, explain what they do to prepare for the event and their preference regarding the venue for the event (at school or somewhere else), present and justify an opinion as to whether the event should continue, and ask a specific question about school events in Japan.

Each message consisted of a chat entry in Japanese and a brief direction in English that provided guidance on how to answer. Students had 90 seconds to read the message and respond at each turn in the text-chat exchange. Each response received a holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. All responses counted equally in calculating the total score.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 19.17 out of a possible 36 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 22.14. 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?

The text chat involved communicating in writing with a student in Japan about social events at his or her school. Most students seemed familiar with the topic and had the vocabulary needed to respond. All the prompts were expressed in straightforward language at the appropriate level. Thus, it appeared that most students had little difficulty understanding them. However, some students apparently misunderstood *いつごろ* in the second prompt *そのイベントは、いつごろあるんですか* and responded mistakenly by stating how often the event would be held. Also some students did not know the meaning of *用意* in the third prompt *あなたはそのイベントのためにどんな用意をしますか*.

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 carefully read the instructions on how to respond to each prompt and should respond as fully and appropriately as possible each time it is their turn. Students should write as much as possible in response to each prompt and not be content with a minimal answer even though that might be appropriate in real life under certain circumstances.
- Instruct students to pay careful attention to the pointer given in English above each of the interlocutor's messages. In this particular text chat, pointers were to "describe specific examples," "respond," "explain your plans," "explain your preference," "justify your opinion," and "ask a specific question" in response to Yuko Fujita's text messages. Some students provided minimal responses that did not follow these instructions and therefore did not fully address the prompts. Have students practice these linguistic functions in class so that they are more familiar with various grammatical and syntactic structures that can be used to fulfill these functions.
- Remind students that there is a 90-second time limit for each response and that they should be sure to read the prompt and write their response within that time limit.
- Give students regular opportunities to type Japanese so that they feel comfortable switching between hiragana and katakana, converting to kanji when appropriate, and producing geminate consonants (っ, っ) and the kana ん and っ correctly. Proper use of Japanese punctuation is necessary to improve readability. Some students used unnecessary spaces between words, which can be time-consuming for them and distracting for readers.

Presentational Writing: Compare and Contrast Article

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write an article for the student newspaper of a school in Japan. It comprised a single prompt that identified two related topics and detailed how those topics should be discussed in the article. Students were asked to compare and contrast studying at home and studying in a library. 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.

Students were given 20 minutes to write an article of 300–400 characters or longer. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.30 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.77. Most students were able to perform the task relatively well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most responses included all the required elements: introduction and conclusion, three aspects of comparison, and expression of preference and reasoning, but some omitted one or more of these parts. Many students were able to use such conjunctions as *そして*, *でも*, *しかし*, and *それから* as well as numbering systems (e.g., *第一に*, *第二に*, *第三に*; *一つ目は*, *二つ目は*, *三つ目は*). Some students effectively used such connecting phrases as *まず*, *つぎに*, *さいごに*, and *けつろんとして*. Some were also able to use such phrases as *なぜなら* and *どうしてかと言うと* to explain their preference. Students would benefit greatly from expanding their repertoire of transitional elements and cohesive devices. Not using complex sentence structures (relative clauses, comparative structures, explanatory phrases) or a variety of grammatical and syntactic structures often marred presentational writing and detracted from the impression of ease of expression.

Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms often led to repetitive or inappropriate use of basic and common vocabulary or interference from the student's primary language. Furthermore, lack of kanji, omission of punctuation and use of unconventional paragraph styles (no paragraph indentation, English-style indentation, paragraphs separated by skipping a line between them) could interfere with readability.

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 to carefully read and address all aspects of the prompt in their responses. Taking time to outline ideas before beginning to write will help students organize their thoughts and structure their essays clearly and logically.
- Spend time helping students learn appropriate ways to introduce and summarize a topic. Students need practice in using a range of appropriate conjunctions and transitional elements. Help them practice appropriate use of more such elements.
- Encourage continued expansion of students' repertoires of vocabulary, idioms, kanji, and grammatical and syntactic structures, which will help them achieve natural, easily flowing expression of their ideas.
- Have students practice appropriate essay layouts; paragraphing and indenting the first line of each paragraph in Japanese style are important in helping readers follow the flow of an essay. For better readability, students should not leave spaces between words, and they should also use punctuation properly. Make sure students understand that to convert to kanji from hiragana, they should hit the space bar after the complete word or phrase is typed, not in the middle of it. Also remind students to carefully read and confirm the kanji conversion they have selected.

- Give students regular opportunities to type Japanese so they feel comfortable switching between hiragana and katakana and converting to kanji correctly when appropriate, using the space bar rather than function keys for shortcuts as the AP Exam setup does not support function keys.

Interpersonal Speaking: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluated speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated conversation. It comprised a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic and four questions. Students had 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. They were to engage in a conversation with Keizo Nakamura, a new neighbor, about recycling garbage. They were expected to respond to his greeting, answer his question about the town's disposal and recycling practices, advise him on what to do with empty cans that he has, and respond to his request for help the next day. Each of the four responses received a holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. All four scores counted equally in calculating the total score.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 12.27 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 15.08. Most students were able to perform the task relatively well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students gave minimal responses to the prompts and did not attempt to elaborate. In response to the first prompt of Keizo Nakamura's greeting (あ、はじめまして。日本から隣に引越してきた中村です。どうぞよろしくお願ひします) some students started talking about garbage immediately based on the English instructions at the beginning and also written on the screen: "You will have a conversation with Keizo Nakamura, your new neighbor, about recycling garbage."

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 very carefully read the instructions on how to respond and then respond as fully and appropriately as possible each time it is their turn. They should say as much as possible that is relevant in response to each prompt and not be content with a brief, though minimally appropriate, answer.
- Caution students to avoid responding to only part of a prompt or to just one phrase within it rather than to the entire prompt.
- Students should always keep in mind the context of the conversation so as to provide the most appropriate responses. They should practice using and responding to set phrases (greetings, apologies, expressions of appreciation, requests for assistance) until they become automatic, and they should also practice elaborating appropriately when using different levels of discourse.

- Practice using — but not overusing — typical Japanese hesitation sounds (あのう, えーと) rather than “um” and “uh” to help the utterances sound more natural.

Presentational Speaking: Cultural Perspective Presentation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed students’ speaking skills in the presentational communicative mode by requiring them to make a presentation on a cultural topic to a Japanese class. It consisted of a single prompt that identified a cultural topic and detailed how it should be discussed in the presentation. Students were to present their view or perspective on Japanese leisure activities. They were asked to begin with an appropriate introduction, discuss at least five aspects or examples of Japanese leisure activities, explain their view or perspective about them, and end with a concluding remark. Students were given 4 minutes to prepare the presentation and 2 minutes for its delivery. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. In addition to language skills, the score reflected the cultural knowledge exhibited in the response.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.18 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.57. Most students were able to perform the task relatively well.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Making a presentation that addressed all aspects of the prompt proved challenging to some students. Some provided inaccurate cultural information, and many more were unable to provide details about the examples or aspects of leisure activities they introduced. Many students were also unable to fully explain their own views or perspectives.

Common errors included a lack of organization and a lack of 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 use complex grammatical and syntactic structures correctly. Most responses were constructed with a limited variety of simple sentence structures. Some students had trouble producing a speech of the appropriate length and finished extremely early, and others ran out of time in an attempt to cover too much material or because of frequent pauses, repetitions and hesitation.

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 to address all requirements of the prompt and to outline their ideas before beginning to speak to ensure that they address all aspects of the prompt — including their own views or perspectives — in a well-organized manner.
- Students need more practice at expressing their own opinions about them.

- Give students the opportunity to practice structuring their oral presentations with appropriate introductory and concluding remarks. Summarizing or restating what they have already said in different words at the end could serve as a conclusion. They also need practice in using a variety of transitional elements and cohesive devices appropriately, using a variety of grammatical and syntactic structures, and building from simple to complex sentences.
- Giving students practice in using a moderate amount of typical Japanese hesitation sounds such as あのう and えーと will help make their speech sound more natural and flow more easily.
- Have students practice producing speeches of the appropriate length so they will know how much they can say in two minutes.