



Student Performance Q&A:

2005 AP[®] Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Gwyn E. Campbell of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. 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.

Part A: Fill-ins

What was the intent of this question?

In this part of the exam, which centers on specific aspects of language usage, students are tested on discrete language items in context. Responses consist of only one word or possibly two. The answers must be completely accurate in order to be correct, since no partial score is given for any one item.

The paragraph-completion section consists of one passage with 10 blanks that are to be filled in with a single word that is an appropriate form of the base word provided in the corresponding prompt. The context of the paragraph on this year's exam was the life of a young woman whose job had brought her to a *pensión* in Buenos Aires, which she shared with the narrator. The items included noun/adjective agreements, one verb tense, the use of the gerund, several past participles as adjectives, and the definite and indefinite article.

The fill-in section contains 10 separate sentences that are to be completed with a correct form of the verb given in parentheses in the prompt. This year's items included the present, imperfect, preterit, and future tenses, several subjunctives, an infinitive after the preposition *por*, and a command.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 8.9 out of a possible 20 points, almost one full point lower than the same group's mean score of 9.83 for this section of the 2004 exam. Similarly, the mean score for the Total Group was 9.51, almost one full point lower than the mean score of 10.4 for the Total Group in 2004.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Because the entire answer must be correct in order for students to receive credit, this can be a challenging part of the exam. For those students who wrote multiple answers for a single item—a smaller group than in past years—each answer had to be correct or exam Readers marked the item as wrong.

The paragraph-completion items and fill-ins constitute a section of the exam that requires precise answers, including correctly written accents. Readers found frequent errors in spelling and the use of accents (as in number 5, which required an accent on *ningún* but not on *ninguna*, and in number 14, which required an accent on *nos quedábamos*). Some students did not know how to form the command in number 16 (*continúa*), and some who did correctly produce the basic form nevertheless accented the word incorrectly or used no accent at all.

Quite a few students did not recognize that the past participles in numbers 1 and 8 were used as adjectives, and they did not correctly make, or perhaps did not recognize, the necessary changes that were required to correctly modify the person in question. Another common problem was not using the gerund of *huir* in number 2. In number 20 many students mistakenly used the plural of *olvidar*, albeit in a correct tense. In number 11 some students did not choose the present indicative tense of *seguir* or they spelled it incorrectly. In number 12 some students did not recognize the need for the future tense or they supplied a subjunctive. In number 17 many students did not choose the preterit of *saber*. Readers also noted errors in the formation and uses of the subjunctive (numbers 13, 18, and 19).

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?

It is always good practice to teach students to read the exam directions carefully. For example, the instructions warn that only one word may be written for the items in the paragraph-completion section of part A. In the fill-in section, however, the instructions state that more than one word may be necessary, such as a compound tense of the verb that has been provided (e.g., *venir* > *hubiera venido*) or a reflexive construction (e.g., *quedarse* > *nos quedábamos*). Changing a verb in a simple tense to a progressive construction (e.g., *sigue* > *está siguiendo*) is not allowed, nor is a periphrastic construction with an infinitive (e.g., *será* > *va a ser*).

* The Standard Group does not include students who speak the language at home or who have lived for more than two months in a country where Spanish is the native language. Decisions on cut-off scores are based on the Standard Group.

Even if the correct form is identical to the prompt in parentheses, as in number 15, the word must be written in the blank. Writing *no cambia* or “no change,” or drawing an arrow from the prompt to the blank, is considered an error, and Readers will score the answer as incorrect. Teach students not only to write the correct form when it is identical to that in the prompt but also to supply an educated guess when they are in doubt. An educated guess will at least give them a chance of writing the correct answer.

Encourage students to read the entire passage or paragraph before they start filling in the blanks; this practice will help them gain a good understanding of each item and its context. Likewise, students should read each fill-in sentence in its entirety before writing their response in the blank. Students should also make it a habit to allow time to proofread their work in order to correct errors in spelling and grammar.

It is important that students have the opportunity to practice this section of the exam in class under conditions and time constraints that are similar to those of the exam. Teachers should also instruct students to supply a single answer for each item. While some items may have several correct answers (e.g., *hubiera venido* or *hubiese venido* in number 18), writing more than one answer increases a student’s chance of error.

Practice in the following language areas can also be helpful.

- *Accents.* Accents must be written correctly and clearly. An accent over a consonant, two accents in a word, unclear placement of an accent (e.g., between two vowels), and words missing their required accents are all incorrect. Students will find it helpful to learn the division of words into syllables as well as the guidelines for when the stress falls on the last or penultimate syllable.
- *Orthographical changes.* Orthographical changes like *empieces* in number 19 can be reinforced through additional work with the rules of pronunciation and an understanding of strong versus weak vowels.
- *Identifying the gender of nouns*
- *Noun/adjective and subject/verb agreements*
- *Verb conjugations.* Routinely identifying the stem of a given tense as part of the process of learning and reviewing verb tenses can be helpful for students.
- *Use of the subjunctive*
- *Sequencing of verb tenses*

Part A: Composition

What was the intent of this question?

The essay tests students’ ability to write a formal and well-organized essay of at least 200 words on a given topic. The question this year posited clothing and physical appearance as a reflection of an individual’s identity within society. It asked students to explain their opinion on this topic and justify it (*por qué*).

How well did students perform on this question?

This year the mean score for the Standard Group was 4.22 out of a possible 9 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.79. These scores were slightly higher than those in 2004, in which the mean score for the Standard Group was 4.12 and for the Total Group, 4.64.

The total mean score for writing (the paragraph completion, fill-in, and composition sections) for the Standard Group was 13.13, and for the Total Group, 14.29, out of a possible 29 points. These scores show a decline from the 2004 mean scores of 13.95 for the Standard Group and 15.04 for the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This year's topic connected well with student experiences and interests, making it possible for students of all levels of Spanish language ability to respond. Concepts and vocabulary required were generally within the reach of most students. The topic elicited perhaps a more informal or conversational response and did not require as sophisticated a level of thought or language as topics in previous years, unless students strove to incorporate a higher level of vocabulary, structure, and thought. Very few students were unable to address the prompt, but perhaps also fewer students demonstrated the highest level of written expression.

The more common errors this year included:

- lack of an effective introduction or thesis statement;
- superficial development of the topic, including excessive repetition and recycling of vocabulary;
- poor organization, particularly in light of students' ability to focus on three items: *ropa*, *apariencia*, and *sociedad*;
- limited use of transitions within or between paragraphs;
- use of informal language that was more suitable for conversation and the absence of rich, precise vocabulary and idiomatic expressions;
- use of only very basic language structures;
- second language interference;
- absence of the definite article; and
- lack of understanding of key words like *opinas*, *reflejado*, *apariencia*, and *identidad*.

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?

No single formula is required for the essay. Nonetheless, students should learn how to organize and write an essay with an introduction, supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion, while using a variety of sentence structures, verb tenses, idiomatic expressions, transition words, and a rich, full

vocabulary. A thesis statement in the introduction, while providing good direction to the essay, can also lend itself to originality in the response. Likewise, a conclusion that goes beyond a mere repetition of the essay's points can enhance a student's treatment of the topic.

Certainly, in-class practice under conditions similar to those of the exam is important. Such practice gives students a much better grasp of what a solid, 200-word essay looks like, thus avoiding the necessity to count words or to write page after page in response. Actual experience with questions from past exams, which are available on AP Central® (<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>), and a careful examination and understanding of the scoring guidelines used to calibrate the essay responses provide students with additional appropriate tools for succeeding on this part of the exam.

The instructions for the essay contain the most helpful suggestion: that students spend the first five minutes reflecting, composing their thoughts, and outlining an organized response. Including this initial planning activity as part of their regular classroom routine may further help students to better organize their responses with well-developed paragraphs that expand on the thesis, treat the topic, and lead to a final conclusion. It is also a good practice to remind students to allow a few minutes to proofread their work so that they may correct any careless spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, or add a missing transitional phrase, key word, or expression. Good planning and organization may help students avoid orality (writing much in the same manner as one speaks), including the colloquial language and run-on sentences that are so frequently characteristic of informal speech.

Reading well-written Spanish prose can greatly enrich students' preparation for the Spanish essay question. If their school libraries have limited Spanish language resources, teachers and students may be able to access online sources of Spanish language books, articles, and newspapers. Additionally, many public libraries have Spanish language print and video resources. It is through reading and ensuing discussions that students gain and develop ideas, enhancing the tools they need to respond to any question in a thoughtful and thorough manner.

Part B: Picture Sequence

What was the intent of this question?

This part of the exam is designed to elicit a narration of the story suggested by a series of six drawings. Students have two minutes in which to demonstrate their oral ability by telling the story as they interpret it. They are expected to use a variety of structures and vocabulary. Fluency and pronunciation are also considered. This year's series showed a busy professional couple planning a dinner in a restaurant for later that evening.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.98 out of a possible 9 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 6.87. Both of these results reflected a slight increase in the mean score for each group compared to the 2004 mean scores of 4.78 for the Standard Group and 6.74 for the Total Group. Most responses demonstrated that students could identify with the theme, and many also understood the comical interpretation of the story. The vocabulary needed was high frequency, encouraging students to use their knowledge and creativity to relate the story in rich, precise vocabulary. The series allowed students to use a variety of verb tenses and the subjunctive mood.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As in previous years, a number of students told the story very quickly and with little enhancement of their narration. Given that the goal was to relate the story as fully as possible within the allotted two minutes, Readers deducted one point from narrations that lasted less than one minute. No point, however, was deducted from the scores of students who filled the two minutes with good detail and fluency but did not complete the entire story. A number of students had some difficulty with identifying the characters in the third picture of the sequence. Any confusion, however, did not impact the overall performance of those students since the task was for students to tell the story as they saw and interpreted it.

Some students did not tell a story per se, but rather went from picture to picture, even stating *En el primer dibujo . . .* and so forth—describing the individual frame, as opposed to relating the story. While this is an error that Readers have observed in previous years, this practice did not occur with the same frequency as it has on past exams. Students who described each frame in this manner generally did not demonstrate an adequate variety of structures or a good range of vocabulary.

Students who earned lower scores often showed an inability to use circumlocution, and they broke down during the narration due to their lack of vocabulary. Similarly, description of the pictures sometimes prevailed over narration of the story due to a lack of correct transitional words or phrases. Some responses had numerous errors in vocabulary and structure, as well as Anglicisms. In a lesser number of cases, poor pronunciation forced Readers to do some interpretation, and this impacted students' scores.

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?

Although it may be common practice to converse in Spanish during class, it is essential that students practice this part of the exam, if possible under the same guidelines and conditions as the actual exam and even with the same equipment they will use. This helps students gain a better sense of the time allotted and practice using it to the fullest. It is very helpful to practice this type of speaking activity from the beginning of the course and routinely throughout the year. However, oral practice does not need to be limited simply to a picture-sequence activity; all kinds of oral activities will ultimately help with this part of the exam.

When students begin to record their responses, they generally are strong. Often, though, they have only prepared the beginning of their stories, and they quickly run out of planned sentences devoted to the opening drawings in the series. Teachers can help students learn to use their preparation time more efficiently, so that their comments are evenly distributed across the entire sequence of drawings.

Prior to the exam the teacher should work with school authorities and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording. Since it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, it is helpful for the teacher and the proctor to review together the relevant pages in the *AP Coordinator's Manual* and the *AP Examination Instructions* book well in advance of the administration (both publications are

available on AP Central). With the increase in use of CDs for recording the speaking section, it is also vital that student responses are recorded properly. Additionally, teachers must impress upon their students that the stopping and starting of their machines while recording in order to give themselves time to think and formulate an answer is not allowed and could result in scores being delayed because of a suspected security violation.

Part B: Directed Responses

What was the intent of this question?

The five questions in the directed responses section of the exam provide a simulated conversation on a single topic. The questions become progressively more complex in terms of content and language, so the challenge for students increases with each question. The questions usually include a command, an opinion to be explained or defended, and a hypothetical situation that requires the use of a subjunctive. This year's topic was reading, books, and authors.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 11.69 out of a possible 20 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 15.34. These scores reflect a slight increase from the 2004 mean scores of 11.28 for the Standard Group and 15.12 for the Total Group and continue the upward trajectory evidenced in recent years in the directed-responses section.

The total speaking mean score (the picture sequence and directed-response sections) for the Standard Group was 16.67, and for the Total Group, 22.21, out of a possible 29 points. These scores are higher than the 2004 mean scores of 16.06 for the Standard Group and 21.86 for the Total Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Because the topic was a familiar one and relatively easy for them to understand, students were able to comprehend most of the questions and handle them well, with the exception of two. In number 2 they experienced some confusion between *tratar* and *tratar de*; in number 5, the more complex hypothetical question whose answer required a subjunctive, they experienced confusion between the verbs *conocer* and *ser*. Some students had trouble with the command required in number 4, but less so than in prior years.

Additional problems and errors in this section of the speaking component of the exam included:

- not using the entire 20 seconds available to answer each question thoroughly;
- labored, halting expression;
- limited vocabulary;
- limited circumlocution;
- poor pronunciation; and
- lack of control of basic structures (verb conjugations, agreement, gender, possessives, etc.).

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?

As with the picture sequence, it is important that students have the opportunity to practice this section of the exam with the equipment they will use during the actual administration. A run-through of the instructions with the proctor is also advisable in order to ensure that the proctor clearly understands that the master CD should not be stopped after each question and that students are instructed not to stop their recordings once they have started to speak.

In other words, the proctor and the students need to understand that the student recordings are initiated at the beginning of the directed-responses section of the exam and not stopped until the very end of the exam (the master recording indicates these starting and stopping points). It is advisable that teachers not ask their students to stop and start their recordings to collect their thoughts when practicing this exercise, because this pattern may well become a habit. Recordings on which the responses stop and start may trigger an investigation of suspected security violations.

When students are uncertain about how to respond to a particular question, they should attempt to say something relevant, no matter how brief, because they may receive some credit for their response. Silence or a series of “ums” will result in a score of 0 for the question. It is very helpful to expose students to a variety of voices, speakers, and accents throughout the course. In so doing, teachers help students learn how to deal with any unfamiliar voice or accent they may hear on the exam. Even in areas where there are no radio or TV programs in Spanish, the Internet offers many free resources, including radio programs, video material, and Spanish-language TV channels. Many public libraries also offer a variety of Spanish language multimedia resources.

In addition to practicing simulated directed responses throughout the year, a variety of other classroom activities like debates or interviews can help students learn how to respond spontaneously and thoughtfully in the target language. Teachers should continue to help students master verb tenses and vocabulary beyond the most basic level, an effort that has been paying off, as Readers noted the more frequent use of both the present and past subjunctive in many responses on this year’s exam.