



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP[®] Chinese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP[®] Chinese Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Tao-chung Yao of the University of Hawaii, Manoa. 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.

Presentational Writing: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task tests writing in the presentational communicative mode by having the student narrate a story to a friend. It consists of a series of four pictures that depict a story. The student is allotted 15 minutes to write the narration. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task. The purpose of this question is to determine whether students can write a well-organized story with a clear progression of ideas (a beginning, middle, and end), including as many details as possible. It also gives students a chance to demonstrate their ability to use appropriate transitional elements and cohesive devices, as well as their command of sentence structure and vocabulary.

This year's pictures were about three friends eating at a Chinese restaurant. When the waiter brings the bill, they realize that they do not have the money to pay it. One girl calls her father for help, and he comes to the restaurant and pays the bill.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 3.57 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.15.

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

What were common student errors or omissions?

The prompt states: “Narrate a complete story as suggested by the pictures.” This means students should examine the pictures carefully and compose a full narration that is consistent with the information conveyed by the sequence of pictures. Some students failed to provide a complete story (with a beginning, middle, and end) and included elements that were irrelevant to the narrative and unrelated to the pictures.

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 familiarize their students with the exam’s scoring guidelines, which can be found on AP Central®, and remind students that they need to concentrate on the information provided in the pictures and on creating a coherent narrative based on the pictures. A response that provides a complete, logical narrative will earn a high score (5 or 6) even if the narrative contains some errors. A response that is free of errors but is incomplete in terms of the scenario presented in the picture sequence will receive a lower score. Teachers should stress the importance of capturing the gist of the picture sequence and of providing as much appropriate detail and elaboration as possible.

Presentational Writing: Personal Letter

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the presentational communicative mode by directing the student to imagine receiving a letter from a pen pal at a Chinese sister school and then to write a reply in letter format. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a topic and asks the student first to discuss the topic in general and then to select one example of the topic and describe what the student either likes or dislikes about the example chosen, justifying the opinion presented with specific examples. The student is allotted 30 minutes to write the letter. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task. This question’s intent is to assess if the student can produce a letter that addresses all of the points in the prompt and that follows the conventions of Chinese letter format.

This year’s prompt asked the student to answer a letter from a pen pal at a Chinese sister school asking about clothes that the student and the student’s friends wear. The student should have first written a response about clothes the student and the student’s friends wear in general; then the student should have chosen one particular way of dressing and described what he or she likes or dislikes about it.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.38 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.87.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students either omitted some elements of letter format or did not use letter format at all. Some students did not fully respond to the prompt. For example, some responded only to the first part of the prompt (“write about clothes you and your friends wear in general”), and others responded only to the second part (“describe either what you like or what you dislike about [a] particular way of dressing”). Many students did not fully adhere to the requirements of the prompt. For example, instead of giving their own opinions, some students asked the pen pal for advice. Others addressed the letter to someone other than the pen pal (e.g., the school principal).

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 to read the prompt carefully and to respond fully by covering everything mentioned in it. Teachers also need to instruct students to give thorough and detailed information. Many students could have earned higher scores if they had elaborated on their responses more fully. Typographical errors cost some students dearly; teachers need to remind students to check their typing carefully to eliminate such mistakes.

Interpersonal Writing: E-mail Response

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student write an e-mail message in response to one received from a friend. Students are allotted 15 minutes to write the response. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task. Students must be able to comprehend the e-mail and then to write a response, addressing all of the questions raised in the e-mail.

This year’s e-mail was about a dilemma involving a single extra ticket for a classical music concert. Zhang Wen has two roommates and does not know how to decide which roommate to invite. Zhang Wen asks for advice on how to make this decision and how to appease the one who is not invited.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.62 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 5.37.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was typographical errors. Students often typed incorrect pronunciation or selected incorrect characters: for example, 那一個 instead of 哪一個, and 升起 instead of 生氣. Another problem was that many students apparently did not read the prompt carefully.

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 need to remind students that they must read the task directions and the prompt carefully and respond accordingly, or they may not address the response with the correct register. For example, some students addressed their response to a sibling or a parent rather than to a friend. It is also important to remind students that there is no need to close an e-mail to a friend by using formal wording for the closing of a letter, such as 敬頌, 順頌, or 敬上.

Interpersonal Writing: Relay Telephone Message

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student write an e-mail message to relay a voice message left for a friend. It consists of a voice message, which the student hears twice, and a direction to the student to type an e-mail relaying the message and its important details. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task. Students are expected to include as much information as possible, especially the essential components of the voice message.

This year's message was about a Chinese New Year festival rehearsal. Xiao Qing calls Li Wen to inform Li Wen about a change in the rehearsal time. Because the weather forecast says that it will snow tomorrow, the teacher has decided to hold the rehearsal today instead, at the same location. Xiao Qing tells Li Wen that their position in the sequence of performances has been moved from fifth to third, so Li Wen should arrive before 7:30 p.m. Li Wen is asked to call Xiao Qing as soon as possible.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.92 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.42.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students relayed the message to the wrong person; for example, they gave the message to Xiao Qing, the caller, rather than to Li Wen, the intended recipient of the message. Quite a few students responded to the message instead of relaying the message.

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 their students to follow the instructions carefully. Explain to students that they are supposed to relay the information in the phone message to a third person (the intended recipient) rather than respond to the message directly. Students must include all of the essential information to make the relay successful: who the caller is, who the recipient is, and why the caller made the phone call. Leaving out any essential information could render the message useless.

Interpersonal Speaking: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student respond as part of a simulated conversation. It consists of a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic followed by six questions. Students are allotted 20 seconds to speak 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. Students need to speak clearly with good pronunciation and make sure that the answer addresses the prompt directly and is culturally appropriate.

This year's conversation was with Wang Min, the manager of a Chinese restaurant, about a part-time job waiting on tables.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 20.54 out of a possible 36 points (6 for each response). The mean score for the Total Group was 27.6.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students seemed not to have listened to the questions carefully. For example, in Conversation 2, students were asked what they know about Chinese food, but many answered in terms of why they are knowledgeable about Chinese food.

Conversation 3 was a comparison question: students were asked to talk about how they would explain the differences between Chinese and Western food. Some students described only the features of either Chinese food or Western food, without making any comparison. Some students apparently misunderstood the prompt; for example, instead of comparing Chinese food with Western food, one student compared lunch with dinner.

In Conversation 4, which asked about what was necessary to do the job well, many students responded very briefly and were not able to elaborate in more detail about the requirements to be a good waiter in a Chinese restaurant. Also, quite a few students did not respond smoothly because of incorrect usage of connectors.

In Conversation 5, many students did not provide supporting details as to why they think having a part-time job will or will not have an impact on their studies.

In Conversation 6, which asked what days and hours students would be available to work, the most common errors were partial answers in which students responded only in terms of days or only in terms of hours instead of in terms of both days and hours.

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 need to remind their students to listen to the questions carefully. This includes picking up on the crucial question words. When students are simulating conversations in class, teachers can help them learn how to elaborate and provide details in their responses. In addition, teaching students how to produce a thoughtful answer under time pressure and how to organize their ideas in a logical manner within a short time span would be helpful.

Teachers should refer to the “5 Cs” (Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) when preparing lessons, and they should implement the horizontal and vertical approaches. The horizontal approach is more focused on the comparison of parallel topics or issues. The vertical approach is more focused on the history or development of an event or topic.

It is important to plan frequent speaking opportunities for students in the classroom and on field trips and to provide plenty of exercises where students must answer a variety of prompts in 20 seconds. Students may not be able to answer questions fluently when first introduced to that format, but in time they should feel much more comfortable with the time limitation.

Presentational Speaking: Cultural Presentation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having students make a presentation on a cultural topic to a Chinese class. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a cultural topic and directs students to select an example of that topic, describe it, and explain what makes it significant. Students are allotted 4 minutes to prepare the presentation and 2 minutes to deliver it. 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.

This year’s task asked students to choose one city in mainland China or Taiwan and then to describe the city and explain its significance.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.58 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.51.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students were asked to describe a city and explain its significance, but some students focused their responses on a province or a country rather than on a city. Many students described a city but did not discuss its significance (e.g., its importance in the region or the nation, or what it represents to the student). Some students recounted personal stories instead of describing a city. Many responses were weak in terms of organization; students may have started with a good introduction, but they failed to maintain a logical structure throughout the response.

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 their students to read the prompt carefully and to answer it as fully as possible, making sure to touch upon all of the aspects of the prompt. Familiarize students with the format of this question by having them give a presentation using the same time constraints (i.e., 4 minutes for preparation and 2 minutes for presentation).

Presentation Speaking: Event Plan

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having students present a plan for an upcoming event to a Chinese class. It consists of a single prompt that identifies an event for which the student has an opportunity to make a plan; it directs students to describe the advantages and disadvantages of different options and to explain what they would do and why. They are given 4 minutes to prepare the presentation and 2 minutes to deliver it. 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 intent is to see if the student can assemble information that is pertinent to the prompt, organize the information in a logical manner, and then present the plan orally with good pronunciation, appropriate vocabulary, and correct sentence structures. Sentences should be logically connected into paragraphs with appropriate transitional elements and cohesive devices.

This year's task asked the student to plan a day of activities to help a group of visiting high school students from China learn about life in a United States high school. In the presentation, students needed to explain the advantages and disadvantages of different options and describe what they would do and why.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.45 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.85.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was not fully responding to all the elements of the prompt. The prompt states: "You have the opportunity to plan a day of activities to help a visiting group of high school students from China learn about life in a United States high school. In your presentation, describe the advantages and disadvantages of different options. Also, explain what you would do and why. Make sure that the content of your presentation reflects awareness of Chinese culture."

To cover everything mentioned in the prompt, students needed to:

1. mention at least two options;
2. explain the advantages and disadvantages of those options; and
3. incorporate into their responses an awareness of Chinese culture in the context of the relevant topic (i.e., school life).

Many students either skipped the planning of activities entirely or talked only about activities unrelated to school life. A significant number discussed only differences between the United States and Chinese school systems in general.

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 to pay close attention to the prompt and to address it fully rather than partially.

Concluding comments: It is clear from this report on student performance on the free-response section of the AP Chinese Language and Culture Exam that many students could have earned a higher score by paying closer attention to the specific requirements of each prompt. Teachers should remind their students to do so, and they should also provide ample opportunities for students to answer free-response questions in class.