



Student Performance Q&A:

2008 AP® Japanese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 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: 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 2008 exam directed students to participate in an exchange of text-chat messages with Akira Nakamura, a high school student in Japan, about how high school students dress. Students were asked to give examples of types of clothing American high school students wear, as well as examples of clothing that is not allowed. They were asked to justify their opinions about wearing school uniforms and to explain their preference in clothing, as well as to ask a question about Japanese secondary school fashions.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 12.7 out of a possible 36 points. The mean score for

* 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.

the Total Group was 16.74. These tasks proved quite challenging for students, who had to adjust their writing to the appropriate style and register, as well as respond appropriately to a variety of questions about high school students' clothing in Japan and the United States.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students seemed to have difficulty comprehending such complex constructions as どんな服を学校に着て行ってはいけないことになっていますか, although they also found it difficult to answer simpler questions, such as アメリカの高校性はたいていどんな洋服を着て学校にいきますか and あなたはどんな服が好きですか. Furthermore, they found it difficult to explain their preference for school uniforms or regular clothing.

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 *respond as fully and appropriately as possible* each time it is their turn. They should keep in mind the context of the text chat and be sure to use the appropriate register and style. Students should pay careful attention to the English instructions that accompany each of the interlocutor's written comments; in this particular text chat, instructions were to "give some examples," "justify your opinion," and "explain your preference" in response to Akira Nakamura's text messages. Some students provided minimal responses that did not follow these instructions and therefore did not fully address the prompt.

Presentational Writing: 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 2008 students were asked to compare and contrast using only kana and kanji and using only romaji. 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 2.06 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.40. This task proved relatively difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students chose not to respond to the prompt—which directed them to write an article comparing writing only in kana and kanji, and writing only in romaji—and instead wrote on a topic of their own choosing. Students must respond to the prompt and write on the appropriate topic in order to receive credit for their responses. Some students were unable to identify and compare and contrast three aspects of writing in kana and kanji versus writing in romaji. Others were able to compare these modes of communication, but their essays showed a lack of organization and were marred by the absence of cohesive devices. Still others neglected to state their own preferences and the reasons for them. Lack of vocabulary made it difficult for some students to fully express their ideas, as did an inadequate grasp of grammar. Students sometimes erred in selecting kanji when using the conversion function in Japanese word processing, leading to passages that were difficult to comprehend. Other students failed to use the conversion function when appropriate and used too much hiragana. Some students hit the space key in the middle of a word or phrase, causing the word processor to convert the kanji characters incorrectly (e.g., 丘あ産は舞に地 instead of お母さんは毎日).

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 the prompt in their responses. Taking time to outline ideas before beginning to write will help students organize their thoughts. Teachers should spend time helping students develop the ability to use a range of appropriate conjunctions, cohesive devices, transitional elements, and ways of organizing and connecting ideas into paragraph-length discourse. Failure to use complex structures (e.g., relative clauses, comparative structures, and explanatory phrases) appropriately often marred presentational writing. Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms frequently led to repetition of basic and common vocabulary (often used inappropriately) or to interference from another language.

Make sure that students understand that to convert kanji from hiragana, they should hit the space bar after the complete word or phrase is typed, not in the middle of it. Students should also be reminded to carefully read and confirm the computer conversions they have selected.

Presentational Writing: Cultural Topic Posting

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the presentational communicative mode by requiring students to write a posting on a cultural topic in a Web forum for students of Japanese. It consists of a single prompt, which identifies a cultural topic, directs the students to select an example of that topic, and details how the example should be discussed in the posting. Students are allotted 20 minutes to write a posting of 300–400 characters or longer. 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 prompt on the 2008 exam instructed students to select an example of a Japanese fictional character, such as Momotaro, Totoro, etc.; to describe in detail at least three different characteristics of the character; and to express their opinion or feelings about the character.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.89 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.50. This task proved moderately difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although the prompt directed students to write on a Japanese fictional character, some students were unable to identify such a character. Some had difficulty describing the characteristics of a character in detail or showed a lack of familiarity with the character. Still others neglected to include their own opinion or feelings about the character. Additionally, some postings showed a lack of organization and were marred by the absence of cohesive devices. Lack of vocabulary made it difficult for students to express their ideas, as did an inadequate grasp of grammar. Students sometimes erred in selecting kanji when using the conversion function in Japanese word processing, which led to passages that were difficult to comprehend. Other students failed to use the conversion function when appropriate and used too much hiragana.

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 the prompt in their responses. Taking time to outline ideas before beginning to write will help students organize their thoughts. Teachers should spend time helping students develop the ability to use a range of appropriate conjunctions, cohesive devices, transitional elements, and ways of organizing and connecting ideas into paragraph-length discourse. Failure to use complex structures (e.g., relative clauses, comparative structures, and explanatory phrases) appropriately often marred presentational writing. Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms frequently led to repetition of basic and common vocabulary (often used inappropriately) or to interference from another language. Students need to have a broad enough introduction to Japanese culture to be able to describe aspects of that culture, such as fictional characters, accurately and to express an opinion about them.

Interpersonal Speaking: 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 2008 exam directed students to engage in a conversation with Yumiko Tanaka, a study-abroad program coordinator, about staying with a family in Japan. Students were expected to respond with their preference about a homestay family and activities in Japan, to give a time frame for study abroad, and to express appreciation for Ms. Tanaka's assistance.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 12.29 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 15.11. This task proved relatively less difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students had difficulty with the level of discourse and the polite expressions required to respond appropriately to Ms. Tanaka. The task required responses to set phrases (e.g., 日本語の勉強がんばってきてくださいね), an expression of a time frame for study abroad, and a description of the characteristics preferred in a host family. Some students had difficulty with one or more of these communicative functions.

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 practice using set phrases until the phrases are automatic, and they should also practice elaborating appropriately when using a variety of levels of discourse. Practice in describing a period of time or time frame is also recommended, as this proved difficult for many students.

Interpersonal Speaking: Return Telephone Call

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses students' speaking abilities in the interpersonal communicative mode by having them respond as part of a simulated telephone conversation. It comprises a voice message for students to listen to, followed by the conversation, which the student initiates and which includes four exchanges. 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 2008 exam required responding to a message from Ms. Kobayashi, who requested a return phone call regarding plans for a club trip.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 9.76 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 12.50. This task proved relatively less difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had difficulty with set phrases that are appropriate to beginning and ending a phone conversation. Many were unable to express appropriate emotion in response to the phone message. Many seemed to have difficulty understanding when they were asked to recommend a way to revise the schedule of trip activities.

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 have many opportunities to practice using set phrases that are appropriate to phone conversations with a variety of interlocutors, as well as appropriate expressions of various emotions. Students also need practice giving advice, expressing concern for others, and making recommendations.

Presentational Speaking: School Announcement

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses students' abilities to speak in the presentational communicative mode by having them deliver an announcement to an assembly of visiting Japanese students. The prompt consists of notes in English about what to include in the announcement. Students are given 1 minute to prepare the announcement and 1 minute to deliver it. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the task.

On the 2008 exam, students were instructed to deliver an announcement about the time, date, location, meeting place, cost, and availability of tickets for an upcoming excursion.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.76 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.30. This task proved relatively difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students neglected to include appropriate opening or closing remarks. In addition, this task required accurate statement of dates, times, prices, and locations, all of which gave some students trouble. Some students had difficulty organizing their announcements and providing appropriate transitional elements. Others lacked adequate vocabulary and resorted to the use of another language. Some students attempted translation of the elements of the notes, rather than organizing them into a coherent announcement in Japanese.

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 practice appropriate opening and closing remarks for use in presentations of various sorts. They also need a solid grasp of the days of the week, dates, times, and numbers and counters to accomplish this task. Practice in linking sentences smoothly and providing appropriate transitions will help students successfully complete this task.

Presentational Speaking: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task measures the ability to speak in the presentational mode by asking students to narrate a story to a Japanese class. It contains a series of pictures that depict a story. Students are allotted 4 minutes to prepare the narration and 2 minutes to tell the story. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task.

The 2008 exam contained four pictures illustrating scenes in a park where two boys are playing ball and an elderly man is watching. The pictures show the elderly man catching the ball and reminiscing about his youth as a baseball player.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.15 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.98. The task proved moderately difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student 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. Other difficulties included lack of a rich vocabulary and idioms and the inability to correctly produce complex sentences. Some students rushed through the narration and did not fully use the allotted time to elaborate on their narration or to provide details. Some students had difficulty with integrating dialogue into their narrations; others relied too heavily on dialogue and neglected narration; and still others described the pictures but did not tell a story.

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 need the opportunity to exercise their imaginations in creating and narrating stories, as well as practice in using cohesive elements and transitions. They should also practice integrating description, dialogue, and narration. Practice in expanding simple sentences to complex sentences by use of conjunctions and other grammatical devices would be helpful, as would exposure to a broad range of topics and the vocabulary that is appropriate to different situations.

Presentational Speaking: 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 prompt on the 2008 exam directed students to present their view or perspective on Japanese pop culture. They were to begin with an appropriate introduction, discuss at least five aspects of Japanese pop culture, and end with a concluding remark.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.97 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.44. The task proved moderately difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students spoke about Japanese traditional culture, rather than pop culture, or were unable to identify five aspects of Japanese pop culture. Other common student 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 correctly produce complex sentences. Other students neglected to include their own view or perspective.

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 encouraged 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 adequate exposure to many aspects of Japanese culture, as well as opportunities to practice describing those customs 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 transitional elements and cohesive devices and building from simple to complex sentences.