

Student Performance Q&A:

2010 AP® Chinese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2010 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 Task: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students narrate a story to a friend. It comprises a series of four pictures that depict a story. Students are allotted 15 minutes to write the narration. The purpose of the task 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. The task 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 task was about cooking dinner for guests. The first picture shows a man and a woman leaving a supermarket, each carrying a bag of groceries. The second picture shows the couple in their kitchen. The woman is cooking a fish, which is burning. The contents of another pot are boiling over, and other food items and utensils are spread over the counter in disarray. With the clock on the wall having just passed 5:30, the man is making a phone call. The third picture shows the man taking Chinese take-out boxes out of a bag and putting them on the dining-room table while the woman is paying a delivery person at the front door. The fourth picture shows the man opening the front door to welcome two guests, a man and a woman; the woman has brought a bunch of flowers. The dining-room table has been set for four people, and the hostess is putting serving dishes filled with food on the table.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 3.39 out of a possible 6 points, lower than last year's mean of 3.52. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.08, lower than last year's mean of 4.40.

* 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?

Typographical errors (especially instances of an inappropriate character with the same or similar pronunciation as a different character that would have been appropriate in the given context) and lack of knowledge of specific vocabulary items were the most frequent problems. Some students seemed to have trouble interpreting the third picture in the sequence, perhaps not recognizing the person at the front door as a delivery person, or not realizing that the containers being placed on the table are the type of take-out boxes typically used by Chinese restaurants in the United States.

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?

The main purpose of the Story Narration task is to assess the student's ability to write a coherent narrative. Although the picture sequence is designed to convey a particular series of events, the scoring of student responses is not based on a specific, preconceived narration, and the sequence of pictures may be open to a variety of interpretations. Help students understand that even if they are unsure of the intended meaning of some elements of the pictures, as long as they can compose a coherent story based on the picture sequence as a whole, they can still score well on this task.

To help students prepare for the Story Narration, and for writing tasks in general, give them the opportunity to practice differentiating words and phrases that sound alike but use different characters and have different meanings.

Interpersonal Writing Task: E-Mail Response

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students write a response to an e-mail message received from a friend. Students are allotted 15 minutes to read the e-mail and write a response. Students first have to comprehend the e-mail and then are required to write a response that addresses all the questions raised in the e-mail.

This year's e-mail came from Zhang Hong, who will start college in the fall and plans to major in Chinese but has not yet been to China. Zhang Hong can choose between two opportunities for spending the summer in China — one is a six-week Chinese language program in Beijing; the other is an internship at a computer company in Shanghai. Zhang Hong asks for advice on which one is a better choice and why. Zhang Hong also wants to know what the recipient of the e-mail plans to do during the upcoming summer.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.28 out of a possible 6 points, lower than last year's mean of 4.45. The mean score for the Total Group was 5.06, lower than last year's mean of 5.32.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Aside from typographical errors, this year's E-Mail Response task seemed relatively easy for students. Because the question asked about topics that are familiar to most high school students — preparing for college and planning summer activities — almost everyone had something to say. Even those who did not address the task directly could receive a minimal score of 1 simply by using the letter-writing convention of addressing the sender of the message in the reply. There were very few scores of 0.

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 respond to all aspects of the prompt. For example, if the e-mail asking for advice contains two questions, the response must address both questions in order to complete the task.

Interpersonal Speaking Task: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students 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. All six scores count equally in calculating the total score. Students need to speak clearly with good pronunciation and make sure that their answer addresses the prompt directly and is culturally appropriate.

In this year's Conversation, the student speaks with a friend named Chen Fang about her upcoming trip to China.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 21.84 out of a possible 36 points, lower than last year's mean of 23.06. The mean score for the Total Group was 27.92, lower than last year's mean of 29.58.

What were common student errors or omissions?

This year's Conversation questions contained a couple of expressions — 名勝古跡 and 交通工具 — that some students might not have been familiar with. As a result, those students had difficulty answering the questions in which they occurred.

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?

Help students practice dealing with unfamiliar expressions by inferring their meaning from the context in which they occur. For example, this year's Conversation contained the expression 名勝古跡 in the following context: 中國好玩兒的地方很多，除了長城以外，還有哪個名勝古跡最值得去看？ The context contains clues (中國好玩兒的地方... 除了長城以外) that can help students guess the meaning of 名勝古跡 even if they have never encountered the expression before.

Sometimes a Conversation question will have more than one element that calls for a response. For example, this year's Conversation contained two questions that asked the student to respond to both a "what?" and a "why?". Many students addressed only the "what" part of the question. Remind students to respond to *all* parts of a question that call for a response.

Presentational Speaking Task: 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 the presentation. In addition to language skills, the task assesses the cultural knowledge exhibited in the response.

This year's task asked students to choose one Chinese celebrity (Yao Ming, Michelle Kwan, Yo-Yo Ma, Jackie Chan, etc.), to describe the selected celebrity, and to explain his or her significance.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.87 out of a possible 6 points, higher than last year's mean of 3.65. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.75, higher than last year's mean of 4.60.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The key word in this year's prompt was "celebrity." Although the examples of celebrities given in the prompt were all contemporary figures, the dictionary definition of "celebrity" is simply "a famous person." Many students chose to talk about a famous historical figure rather than a contemporary celebrity, and those responses were accepted as equally legitimate.

Many responses were heavy on describing the celebrity but light on discussing the celebrity's significance. And every year, we find a few answers to the Cultural Presentation task that are not relevant to the topic and that sound as if they were memorized ahead of time.

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 each year's exam has a different Cultural Presentation prompt, so they cannot simply memorize something in advance and use that as their answer. When a response is unrelated to the current prompt, it will be given a score of 0, no matter how good the language is.

Help students practice organizing their thoughts within the allotted time so that they can deliver a coherent and cohesive answer.

Remind students to read the prompt carefully and address all its aspects. Also, students need more classroom practice on recognizing and discussing cultural perspectives based on their observations of cultural products and practices.