



Student Performance Q&A: 2012 AP® Japanese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 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 Taro Yamamoto, a student in Japan. The prompt comprised a statement in English identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic, and a series of six brief messages to which the student responded. Students were asked to (1) describe sports that are popular at their school; (2) talk about what they do in their physical education classes by providing more than one example; (3) state their preference between physical education or Japanese class; (4) talk about what sports they think are popular in Japan; (5) give their opinion about whether playing sports is important and explain why; and (6) ask a question about physical education and sports in Japan. Each message consisted of a chat entry in Japanese and a brief direction in English that provided guidance on what was expected in the response. Students had 90 seconds to read the message and respond at each turn in the exchange. Each of the six responses received a holistic score on how well it accomplished the assigned task, and all six scores counted equally in calculating the total score.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 17.45 out of a possible 36 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 20.34.

* The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Japanese at home or who have lived for a total of 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 topic of the text chat (sports and physical education) seemed familiar to most students, and all six prompts were expressed in straightforward language at the appropriate level. Thus the students were generally able to respond to all the prompts. However, a significant number of responses contained errors in the spelling of sports terms that were to be written in katakana. There were also responses indicating a lack of clear understanding of such key words as 人気 (in prompts 1 and 4) and 体育 (in prompts 2, 3, and 6).

Furthermore, some responses to prompt 3 mistakenly compared physical education classes in the United States and Japan rather than students' preference for physical education classes or Japanese class. For prompt 5, many responses did not correctly use the sentence patterns that would be most appropriate in providing reasons for one's opinion (e.g., なぜなら～からです). For the same prompt, reasons provided in some responses were overly simplistic (e.g., スポーツはいいです) as opposed to more desirably specific types of justification, such as physical (e.g., improvement of health), social (e.g., teamwork, friendship), psychological (e.g., stress relief), and intellectual (e.g., improved study habits) benefits.

Finally, a significant number of responses to the final prompt incorrectly asked personal questions about the interlocutor's views or perspectives rather than general questions about physical education classes and sports in Japan.

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 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 one that may 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 text chat, the pointers were to "describe specific examples," "give more than one example," "give your preference," "give some examples," "justify your opinion," and "ask a question" in response to the interlocutor's text messages. Some students provided minimal responses that did not follow these instructions and therefore did not fully address the prompts. Teachers should have students practice these linguistic functions in class so that they become 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 could improve readability. Some students used unnecessary spaces between words (分かち書き), which can be time consuming for them and distracting for AP Readers.

Presentational Writing Task: Compare and Contrast Article

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed writing skills 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, which identified two

related topics and detailed how those topics should be discussed in the article. Students were asked to compare and contrast spending time with friends and spending time with family. They were asked to describe at least three aspects of each and highlight the similarities and differences between the two. They were also asked to state their preference and give reasons for it. Students were given 20 minutes to write an article of 300 to 400 characters or longer. The response received a single holistic score on how well it accomplished the assigned task.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.03 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.44.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The topic of spending time with friends and family seemed to be familiar to most students. However, very few responses used the word *すごす*, the closest Japanese equivalent of “spend”; instead, many students expressed the same meaning by using different but appropriate words, such as *友達/家族と遊ぶ*, *友達/家族と会う*, *友達/家族との時間*, and *友達/家族といっしょの時*.

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*, which helped to improve sentence-to-sentence connection and enhanced overall coherence. They also used paragraphs as devices to structure an essay, using such transitional phrases as *第一に*、*第二に*、*第三に*; *一つ目は*、*二つ目は*、*三つ目は*; and *まず*、*つぎに*、*さいごに*、*けつろんとして* at the beginning of respective paragraphs. Some were also able to use such phrases as *なぜなら*、*～からです* and *なぜかと言うと*、*～からです* to explain their preference.

Very limited use of complex sentence structures (e.g., relative clauses, comparative structures, and 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 to interference from the student’s primary language. Furthermore, lack of kanji, omission of punctuation, and use of unconventional paragraph styles (e.g., 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 essay clearly and logically.

Spend time helping students learn appropriate ways to introduce and summarize a topic. Students need to practice using a range of appropriate conjunctions and transitional phrases. Help them practice appropriate use of such expressions. Encourage students to continue expanding their repertoire of vocabulary, idioms, kanji, and grammatical and syntactic structures, which will help them to 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 improving the flow of an essay and its readability. For better

readability, students should not leave spaces between words (分かち書き), and they should 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. Students should also be reminded 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 Task: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluated speaking skills 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 a series of four related utterances in Japanese. Students engaged in a conversation with their friend Yumiko Tanaka about club activities done once a week. They were expected to (1) state their preference between the two club activities (cleaning a park and helping elementary school children with their study), (2) suggest a good day and time for the chosen activity, (3) explain why the suggested day and time are good, and (4) respond to Yumiko's request that at the next club meeting they announce what has just been discussed. Students had 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the four responses received a holistic score on how well it accomplished the assigned task, and 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 11.34 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 14.74.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The topic seemed to be familiar to most students, and all four prompts were expressed in straightforward language at the appropriate level. Thus the students were generally able to respond to all the prompts. However, some responses to prompt 1 indicated a lack of accurate comprehension of the question, as seen in the use of such words as 学校のそうじ and 友達の勉強を手伝う. Many students were unable to respond to both parts of the question asked in prompt 2, giving either a day or days of the week or the time alone. An insufficient response to prompt 2 affected the response to prompt 3, as these two prompts were closely related.

To express a specific time, some students mistakenly used 時間 instead of 時, as in お昼の1時間から3時間までがいいです. A typical linguistic error in giving reasons was the absence of からです in the sentence pattern なぜなら、～からです, as in なぜなら、ひまです. Many students misunderstood or did not comprehend the phrase 伝えてくれる of prompt 4, providing responses guessed from the beginning part of the prompt.

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 and listen very carefully 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 and appropriate in response to each prompt and not be content with a brief,

though appropriate, answer. Students sometimes responded to only part of a prompt or to just one phrase within it rather than to the entire prompt. Very careful listening is required, and frequent simulated practice is highly recommended.

Students should always keep in mind the context of the conversation so as to provide 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 (e.g., あのう, えーと) rather than “um” and “uh” will help the utterance sound more natural.

Presentational Speaking Task: Cultural Perspective Presentation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assessed speaking skills in the presentational communicative mode by having students give 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 begin with an appropriate introduction, discuss at least five aspects or examples of Japanese leisure activities, explain their own 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 on how well it accomplished the assigned task. In addition to language skills, the score reflected the level of cultural knowledge exhibited in the presentation.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.01 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 4.58.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The topic of popular places to visit in Japan seemed to be familiar to most students and they were able to speak on the topic. However, some responses lacked clear organization or transitional phrases. In addition, the absence of appropriate cohesive devices from sentence to sentence sometimes led to the presentation of scattershot bits of information. Insufficient detail or elaboration was another common characteristic in many speeches. Some speeches included inaccurate cultural information, and some were unable to explain their own view or perspective fully or clearly.

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 owing to too much material to cover or 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 view or perspective — in a well-organized manner. Students need more than superficial exposure to many different aspects of

Japanese culture, as well as many opportunities to practice describing those Japanese cultural products, practices, and perspectives 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. 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.

Using a moderate amount of typical Japanese hesitation sounds, such as あのう and えーと rather than “um” and “uh,” will help make the speech sound more natural and flow more easily. Students should practice producing a speech of the appropriate length so they will know how much they can say in two minutes.