



Student Performance Q&A:

2015 AP[®] French Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] French Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Pascal Ifri of Washington University in St. Louis. 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.

Task 1: E-mail Reply

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student write a reply to an e-mail message. Students were allotted 15 minutes to read the message and write the reply. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the e-mail and then to write a reply using a formal form of address. The reply must address all the questions and requests raised in the message, as well as ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.

The course theme for the e-mail reply was “*la science et la technologie*.” The task required students to respond using formal register to two questions from a person in charge of organizing a speech and debate tournament in Montreal, on the influence of science and technology in daily life, today and in the future. It is explained in the introduction to the e-mail message that the student has been nominated for the tournament by his or her French teacher. The two questions asked were the following: “What scientific or technological invention has influenced your life the most and how?” and “According to you what problem(s) of our world could science and technology solve?” The students were also required to ask for more details about some point mentioned in the e-mail.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s mean score for Task1: E-mail reply (Interpersonal Writing) was 3.09 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was a lack of understanding of question 2. Instead of mentioning problems of the world that science and technology could solve, many students mentioned problems that science and

technology could create or cause. Another common mistake came from the name Gabrielle that some students mistook as the name of a man (even though she is described as the “*Directrice*” of the program). Many students also failed to answer both questions separately, despite the fact that they were clearly distinct, or to ask for more details about something mentioned in the message, as requested in the instructions. There were also register issues (e.g., “*tu*” instead of “*vous*,” incorrect salutation or closing formulas). Finally, there were a great deal of grammatical mistakes (pronouns, verbs, “*si*” clauses, etc.), spelling errors, an overuse of the subjunctive in sentences that did not require it, a lack of transitional words, 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?

- Teachers have to remind students that they have to complete all the elements of the task: respond to both specific questions/requests expressed in the e-mail and then ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.
- Teacher should encourage students to make a brief outline before starting the task and teach them basic transitional words to move smoothly from one idea to another. They should also work with students on answering the questions posited in the e-mail with sentences rather than lists. Students should offer more in-depth information in their response.
- Teachers should teach students how to write simple but correct sentences rather than to encourage them to memorize formulas, such as salutation or closing formulas. There is often a big discrepancy between the beginning and the end of the e-mail and the body of the text. Teachers should help their students with the body of the text.
- Teachers should not encourage students to use ready-made sentences with idioms. Most of the time, those sentences do not fit the topic.
- Teachers should ask students not to merely recycle language from the stimulus, but to answer the questions directly and to try to bring in words and expressions beyond those included in the stimulus. Students need to use language with which they are comfortable and familiar.
- Teachers should make sure that students understand how to maintain the formal register throughout their response and to use the proper/appropriate vocabulary directly related to the topic.
- Teachers should make their students regularly practice this task-type and respond to e-mails covering a wide range of topics from the course themes. Right before the exam, it would also be helpful for students to have a “mock” testing environment in which they are asked to complete this task in 15 minutes.

Task 2: Persuasive Essay

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having the student write a persuasive essay on a given topic while referencing three sources of information about the topic. Students were first allotted 6 minutes to read the essay topic and the two printed sources. Then they listened to the one audio source. Afterward, they had 40 minutes to write the essay. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the three sources and then to present their different viewpoints. They also had to present their own viewpoint and defend it thoroughly, using information from all of the sources to support the essay. As they referred to the sources, they had to identify them appropriately. Furthermore, the essay had to be organized into clear paragraphs.

The course theme for the persuasive essay task was “*les défis mondiaux*.” Students had to write a persuasive essay on the following topic: “Should the use of GMO (genetically modified organisms) be allowed in food production?” The first source was an article titled “The first steps towards GMO.” The article describes the introduction of GMO in Africa in order to substantially increase food and milk production. The second source was a map indicating areas cultivated with GMO in several countries. The third source was a discussion between two journalists about a French study describing the negative impact of GMO on the environment.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group’s mean score for Task 2: Persuasive Essay (Presentational Writing) was 3.10 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most serious error was that students had a difficult time understanding the position presented in the third source (audio selection), which clearly presented an opposing opinion of the use of GMO to the first source (article) which clearly defended the use of GMOs. Because of the way the audio source was introduced, many students wrongly thought that the journalist who was being interviewed was in favor of the use of GMOs. As a consequence, the students also argued in favor of their use, especially since it appears that most students did not seem to know the issue well or have a strong opinion about it. Many of them also misinterpreted the second source (a graphic — map) which clearly indicated numerically the percentage cultivated areas and not percentage of use. Additionally, they did not understand that the use of the symbol “X” on the map overlapping France meaning that the country does not use GMO.

As in the past, many students failed to take into account or integrate the information from all three sources to support their personal argument.

Most students seemed to have been taught how to organize a persuasive essay, but many of them did not have a sufficient knowledge of the language and grammar to present their ideas in a satisfactory manner. As a consequence, they used neologisms or anglicisms and their essays were marred by basic grammatical errors such as agreement mistakes, incorrect use of the subjunctive, incorrect verb conjugations and verb tenses, incorrect use or knowledge of various pronouns, 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?

- Teachers should teach students how to write an essay with clear introductory and closing paragraphs; body paragraphs in which the students build an argument and organize their ideas effectively and coherently, and how to use transitional words/phrases to link the paragraphs together. Teachers should also inform their students that the content and structure is more important than length.
- Teachers should give their students opportunities to practice developing their own points of view in writing based on articles or audio selections in the target language. They should particularly reinforce the fact that this task requires a clear statement of the student’s own opinion rather than a mere restatement of stereotypes or of opinions expressed in the source materials.
- Teachers should make sure that their students know the basic vocabulary associated with the themes of the course and that they know the necessary grammar, especially the correct use of verb tenses (i.e., all tenses in the indicative mood, the subjunctive with the following conjunctions: “*bien que*,” “*à condition que*,” “*pour que*”) and verbal constructions (i.e., “*si*” clauses). They also should make students aware of common anglicisms and “*faux amis*.”
- Teachers should remind students to make sure they understand the sources well. This may be done by taking clear notes on the three sources, developing a basic outline before writing, and then

compose a coherent essay integrating and identifying all three sources into their argument.

- Since the course covers Francophone countries as well as France, teachers should introduce their students to the Francophone world and some cultural aspects of the various countries so that students may avoid using stereotypes. In addition to the use of online materials, inviting guest speakers from Francophone countries would be an excellent educational experience for their students, which they could bring into this task.
- Teachers need to incorporate the use of authentic audio and print materials in their lessons and assess students on their understanding of the material. Authentic materials must be used in assessment rather than just as “supplemental” material.
- Teachers should remind their students to write clearly and legibly and to use quotation marks if they take material from the sources. As part of the instructions, the students also need to clearly identify the sources as they are used in their essay.

Task 3: Conversation

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student respond as part of a simulated oral conversation. Students were first allotted 1 minute to read a preview of the conversation, including an outline of each turn in the conversation. Then the conversation proceeded, including 20 seconds for students to speak at each of 5 turns in the conversation. The series of 5 responses received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The responses had to appropriately address each turn in the conversation according to the outline as well as the simulated interlocutor’s utterance.

The course theme for the conversation task was “*la famille et la communauté*.” In this task, the student is required to have a conversation with Salim, a classmate, about the celebration of “Francophone Week” at the students’ school. Salim asks the student for ideas and suggestions. The student needed to respond to the following five audio prompts:

1. Salim explains that his teacher has asked students to organize an international day at the school, with a meal and a few activities. Salim is thinking of having a Moroccan meal and asks the student if he/she is interested in collaborating with him. The student had to accept and explain why.
2. Salim would like to have a traditional meal and suggests a *méchoui*, an entire sheep roasted on a barbecue. He asks the student what he/she thinks about it. The student had to explain why it is not a good idea.
3. Salim understands and suggests a simpler dish, a *tagine*, a mixture of meats and vegetables in a sauce. Then he asks the student for ideas concerning possible activities to celebrate the “Francophone Week.” The student had to offer some suggestions.
4. Salim then says that he will discuss those suggestions with the teacher. He adds that he must meet with the student to plan everything and asks him/her when he/she can do so. The student had to respond by offering times to meet.
5. Salim thinks that everyone will enjoy the day and thanks the student for his/her help and says goodbye. The student had to express his/her enthusiasm and end the conversation in an appropriate manner.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group's mean score for Task 3: Conversation (Interpersonal Speaking) was 2.69 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The first part of the first prompt was not always well understood. Many students thought that the word "*journée*" meant "trip" rather than "day," even though this is a basic vocabulary word that is generally taught in French 1. Consequently, this impacted the students' understanding of the basic premise of the conversation, leading to some confusion throughout the remainder of the conversation. Some students were also confused by the direction "*dites pourquoi*" ("say why") in the instructions. Rather than explain why they accepted Salim's proposition, they just said: "*pourquoi?*" This is an example of how the students took the directions too literally. In addition, a number of students had problems with the verb "*se réunir*," which in French can only involve two people, and did not know what to say after the fourth prompt. There was also some confusion caused by the fact that Salim mentions both an International Day and a Francophone Week at his school.

As this is a task in which the students are to use informal register "*tu*," there were students who would speak in both the informal and formal register which caused a problem with the use of the proper personal pronouns. And as usual with this task, some students had responses that were too short, especially after the last prompt ("*À plus*," — "See you later").

Many students do not know how phrases on how to express their emotions: enthusiasm, in this case. Consequently, many just said: "*Je suis très excité(e)*."

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 carefully explain the process for this task type and remind students to read the instructions and the outline carefully and to underline the key words. They should also encourage students to listen to the prompts carefully, to concentrate on what is being said and to respond following the outline provided.
- Teachers should refrain from asking their students to use constructions, structures, expressions, or idioms just to impress the listener. Most of the time the conversation calls for simple sentence structure and a comfortability to speak for the full 20 seconds.
- Teachers should practice the task with their students to get them used to giving 15-20 second responses. It is important for students to elaborate as much as possible rather than just give brief responses. The students need to participate as fully as possible in the conversation. It is also important that they respond in sentences with correct verb usage and conjugations. It is highly recommended that students practice the use of a variety of verbal structures. Teachers should also include conversational exercises in class so that students can acquire and assimilate colloquial vocabulary and expressions. Students would benefit greatly from practice with geographical prepositions (i.e., "*en France*," "*aux États-Unis*").
- Teachers need to work with students on pronunciation skills. Many errors are made due to mispronunciation of vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation of verb endings. Good pronunciation and pacing are keys for success in this task. This task does not require students to speak quickly. Accuracy and the ability to correctly participate in the conversation are more important than the speed with which the students respond.

- It is of utmost importance that teachers work closely with the AP Coordinator or administrators at their school to make sure that they are familiar with the technical part of the exam. The proctors must be trained on how to use the equipment that will be used to capture the student responses. Lack of training for the proctors may result in scoring difficulties, and students could be penalized.

Task 4: Cultural Comparison

What was the intent of this question?

This task assessed speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having the student make a comparative oral presentation on a cultural topic. Students were allotted 4 minutes to read the topic and prepare the presentation and then 2 minutes to deliver the presentation. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The presentation had to compare the student's own community to an area of the French-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the French-speaking world. Furthermore, the presentation had to be organized clearly.

The course theme for the cultural comparison was "*la quête de soi*." Students had to respond to the following question: "How has immigration and the presence of immigrants affected people's lives in your community?" Students had to compare their observations in their own community to that of a Francophone country or region. Students could make reference to what they had studied, observed, and/or experienced in order to support their claims.

How well did students perform on this question?

The Standard Group's mean score for Task 4: Cultural Comparison (Presentational Speaking) was 2.66 out of a possible 5.00 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common error was that students did not read the question carefully. They discussed the immigration issue in their community and in a Francophone community rather than deal with the impact of immigration on those communities. Some mentioned the impact of immigration, but on one community only, and thus did not fulfill the task, which is a comparison between two cultures. Others did not explicitly make a comparison but rather presented a series of facts that are characteristic of each culture mentioned. Others gave an unbalanced response, spending too much time on one of the two cultures. Some students, especially those currently in a Francophone environment, did not understand that they had to compare their community to a different area of the French-speaking world. In addition, most responses were filled with cultural stereotypes and revealed a disheartening lack of knowledge about the Francophone world (for instance, all French people are racist).

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 introduce students to various Francophone cultures in as much depth as possible, using current authentic (audio and print) material, to ensure that students have a clear understanding of those cultures that goes beyond stereotypes and clichés. They should use online material, radio, and television programs, films, newspapers, magazines, etc. They should also invite Francophone guests, if possible.
- Teachers should carefully explain and practice this task type to students and emphasize the need for a comparison of two cultures. The teachers also need to remind students to carefully read the topic of the presentation.

- Teachers should encourage students to make good use of the four minutes they have to prepare their response. They should explain to them how to organize their thoughts and how to take effective notes. Using topics from past exams or from other language exams, they should also make them practice the task, if possible, with the technology used during the exam. While taking notes, students should make sure that they have written information on both cultures.
- Teachers should give students various strategies leading to an effective comparison: methods for introducing transitional phrases and structures needed to compare and contrast, and means for providing the vocabulary to present one's opinion. In particular, students should practice making an effective presentation rather than offering a list of ideas/characteristics.
- Teachers should emphasize that an effective comparison requires students to equally discuss both their own community and a Francophone community, and that they must explicitly articulate the similarities and especially the differences between them.
- Teachers should attend AP Summer Institutes/Workshops if at all possible.