



Student Performance Q&A: 2013 AP[®] Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2013 free-response questions for AP[®] Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Dr. Gustavo Fares, Professor of Spanish at Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin. 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.

Question 1: Writing, Interpersonal

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to measure the student's ability to compose an electronic message with proper register, while responding appropriately to all five parts of the prompt. The students had 10 minutes to read the prompt and to write a response that was at least 60 words in length. The task asked them to imagine that they had just returned from a camping trip with friends and to write a message to the student's best friend who was unable to accompany them to the camping trip. In the message, the students were asked to do five things: greet the best friend, describe the place where they camped, give details about what they did in the trip, invite the best friend to a future camping trip, and say goodbye. The response was scored on effective task completion and topic development in one category and language use in a second category.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group¹ was 2.86 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.34.

Writing an electronic message to a friend used a vocabulary that was of relatively high frequency and so the majority of the samples showed that students were able to accomplish the task. The prompt lent itself to a variety of structures and tenses.

¹ The Standard Group does not include students who speak Spanish at home or who have lived for more than one month in a country where Spanish is the native language. Decisions on cutoff scores are based on the Standard Group.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There were five elements to be included in the answer. Although the five elements of the task were clearly indicated in the prompt, common errors included the omission or misinterpretation of one—or more—of the items. Overall, the elements of the prompt misinterpreted were related to whom had gone to the camping trip, or to the invitation to a future event. For some students it was difficult to decide to whom the e-mail was being addressed, and why he or she was inviting a friend to a trip similar to the one he or she had completed. Still, some students wrote the message in the future, and neglected to recount the experiences of the trip just completed.

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?

- Create a variety of interpersonal writing tasks to simulate this question for classroom work and as homework. Regular practice of this type of question, under the same constraints as those of the exam, will assist students in best preparing for the interpersonal writing task on the exam.
- Routine practice, including editing for consistency, should also provide for tasks using different registers in the written responses.
- Give students practice rephrasing the information contained in the prompt so that they can practice answering this type of question, paying special attention to the setting for the response.
- Provide students with practice answering this question using a variety of verb tenses beyond the present tense and with vocabulary beyond that of the prompt itself. Teachers may want to practice discerning to whom the message needs to be addressed and to speak about proper register for this type of message.

Question 2: Writing, Presentational

What was the intent of this question?

This question was an example of the presentational mode of writing and a task that integrates the skills of reading, listening, and writing. Students were asked to understand, organize, and synthesize information from three different sources into a cohesive written response to a prompt about the effects of laughter in the physical and psychological wellbeing of people. The instructions, in both English and Spanish, asked students to use information from all three sources to support their ideas, to identify the sources clearly, and to avoid simply summarizing the sources individually.

This task was based on three sources, including both print and audio material. The first print article was entitled “La ciencia lo avala: reírse mejora la salud” that appeared in the electronic journal *Eroski Consumer* in November 2005. The second print source was an article entitled “El que ríe vive mejor” from the magazine *Muy Interesante* from April 2010. The recorded audio file was an adaptation of an article recording entitled “El beneficio de la risa” and appeared in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* on December 12, 2002. Students had 7 minutes to read the printed material, and they listened to the audio selection for approximately 3 minutes. They were instructed to take 5 minutes to plan their responses and then 40 minutes to write an essay of about 200 words. They were scored on effective task completion, topic development, and language use, equally considered.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.88 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.03.

The total mean score on the writing portion of the exam (both interpersonal and presentational) for the Standard Group was 5.75 out of a possible 10 points. For the Total Group, the mean score on the writing portion was 6.36.

The language required to answer this question was of reasonably high frequency. Many students used the ample vocabulary and grammar from the two print sources and the third source to write detailed essays of considerable length.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The language required to answer the prompt was of reasonably high frequency. However, many students were hampered by unfamiliar vocabulary, errors in grammar, and problems with the conventions of the written language.

A common error in task completion was only providing a very general mention, if at all, of the audio source. When referring to the sources many students simply copied language from the print sources, making it more difficult to determine whether the source of the language itself was the student's or the texts. In such cases, it can be more difficult to assess the students' ability to summarize and synthesize the material from the sources. Many students did not organize their response well, and many simply followed the order in which the sources were presented. This strategy makes integrating the sources cohesively difficult.

A common student error was the misinterpretation and lack of understanding of some vocabulary items that appeared in the sources. The three sources presented an expanded perspective of the positive impact of laughter in the general well being of people. The most common errors were misinterpreting some vocabulary or technical concepts, such as "leptina," "hormona," "endorfinas," or "encefalinas." In general, some students recognized the terms, but had some difficulty in using them cohesively in the essay.

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?

- Practice with as many authentic sources as possible because relating the information from the audio source presents a difficulty for some students. Help students focus on understanding the essence of the audio source while taking brief notes. This suggestion is not limited to the audio sources alone; routine practice with printed sources is important as well. Throughout the year, give students presentational writing assignments that include two printed sources and one audio source.
- Provide students with examples of ways in which to make reference to printed and audio material alike. Help students find which article seems to best summarize the answer to the question, and have that source be the anchor of the essay.
- Discuss and illustrate the differences between summary and synthesis. It is also always helpful to reinforce general essay-writing skills, such as prewriting, editing, and proofreading.
- When possible, use graphic organizers that would allow students to take notes on the main points from the sources and be better able to relate them to one another.

Question 3: Speaking, Interpersonal

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' interpersonal communication skills. The task elicited responses based on a recorded, simulated conversation and an outline that asked students to perform different linguistic tasks throughout the conversation. Instructions in both English and Spanish told students they had 30 seconds to read the outline of the conversation. They then listened to a recorded

message and had 1 minute to reread the outline that indicated six elicited responses they were to give as fully and appropriately as possible.

The simulated conversation required the students to participate in a conversation with Mr. Rosales, a school counselor who will write a letter of reference for the student. The students were told to imagine they were at Mr. Rosales' office to discuss their academic interests and plans to study at the university level. There were six student interventions. The conversation outline was a summary of what the recorded speaker said and what the students were expected to do. The dialogue kept to the specific topic/task about academic interests and personal characteristics that the student would like Mr. Rosales to include in his letter. The development of the task began with a question about the student's academic year. The second intervention required students to comment on the academic subjects they were interested in, while the third question requested information on extracurricular activities. The next prompt asked students to speak about where they would prefer to study, nearby or further away from home, followed by an open-ended question about what other information the student wished to have included in the letter. Finally, the student was asked to agree to meet again and to say goodbye.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.02 out of a possible 5 points.. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.94.

The ideas presented in this simulated conversation were realistic and typical of questions of an academic conversation. The majority of students were able to respond to the prompts of the conversation and to accomplish the task. Students were able to engage in this conversation about topics related to academic interests and personal characteristics with vocabulary that was generally familiar to them. This was a very pertinent conversation topic, one in which most students had been recently engaged as they are finishing their high school education. Ideally, they were able to recall their own interview and participate in the conversation with ease.

Because the conversation moved in a direct and sequential fashion, most students were able, in many cases, to include a greater range of vocabulary. This situation allowed students to demonstrate correct social and cultural references for an academic setting. Use of a formal register would be most appropriate. Questions were straightforward and somewhat easier to understand than in previous years, because they were focused on the students and were therefore very accessible to them. Although the prompts were presented in the present indicative, students included present, past, and future and subjunctive mood, when asked about their preferences, along with the possibility of subjunctive mood students asked about their preferences. The absence of direct instructions for responding to the prompts helped some students to be creative in their responses.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There were some challenges in being creative while developing ideas because the prompts were rather open, which required students to be more thoughtful about their responses and to generate vocabulary to develop the task. The student is not just answering "yes," "no," "where," "when" types of questions, but providing detailed and accurate information in response to open ended questions. There is also the challenge to include complex structures and a variety of verb tenses because the dialogue may be completed using only the present indicative. Other common challenges for the students were finding ways to rephrase and incorporate additional and relevant vocabulary, and ideas for prompts two and three, which were somehow revisited in prompt 5, about general information related to the student. In these instances some students tended to repeat or rephrase what they had previously indicated, recycling vocabulary.

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?

- Create similar telephone conversations to simulate this task and practicing them often in class. This will familiarize the student with the format of the exam and will help them to develop the topic fully and thoroughly.
- Make sure students and proctors are familiar with the operation of the equipment and with the examination protocol prior to the actual exam so that responses are recorded properly. As the number of digital recordings increases annually, the problems of poor burning of CDs increases. It is stated by the master CD that at the end of the simulated conversation the students are to hit stop until they are instructed to hit **pause** for the Presentational Question. This may be a reason why so many digital files are lost as you may not be able to pause in a digital recording.
- Work with the technology department of their schools, simulating the examination several times so that the technician responsible for the burning of the exam files is as familiar with the operation, as is the teacher. Just as the students check to see if they have properly recorded on a cassette, the student and the technician should check on the AP[®] CD.

Question 4: Speaking, Presentational

What was the intent of this question?

This second part of the speaking portion of the exam was an example of the interpretive and presentational mode. Students were asked to give a 2-minute presentation in a formal/academic setting integrating reading, listening, and speaking skills. As indicated in instructions in both English and Spanish, students had 5 minutes to read the printed article and then were told to take notes while listening to the audio source. They had 2 minutes to prepare their responses and 2 minutes to record them. In the instructions students were explicitly told that they were “expected to use all the response time to speak.”

The prompt asked students to compare the ideas presented in the two sources about experiences and perspectives about sports. The printed source, “María Espinoza” appeared in the Mexican electronic journal, *El Universal*, on July 13, 2007. The auditory source was an interview with an Argentinean athlete, Ana Traversa. Students responses were scored on effective task completion, topic development, and language use, equally considered. Both sources were very similar in theme, but different as to the kind of sport practiced by each of these two female athletes. Both sources related information about the benefits these practitioners had received from the sports, the enjoyment gained from the activity they are engaged in, and the emphasis placed on how important dedication has been to their success. There were differences students were expected to understand, such as the different sports Ana and María practiced, the regularity in their training, their countries of origin, and their different attitudes towards competition. The audio source was an interview done specifically for the exam, and as such, it contained ample information students could use, and it was delivered with good sound quality.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.87 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.27.

For the Standard Group, the total mean score on the speaking (interpersonal and presentational) portion of the exam was 5.88 out of 10 possible points. The total mean score for the Total Group was 7.20.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As was the case in 2012, the content of the two sources provided several similarities and few differences, a fact that may not have been expected by students who anticipated a balance of similarities and differences. Students who were expecting to use a “back-and-forth” between the sources may have found this type of comparison more difficult. However, by the students’ responses it is evident that they were able to successfully compare the sources.

Many students tended to summarize the information presented rather than comparing and contrasting. Many students were able to understand the audio source, and they were also helped by the fact that it contained lots of information, which allowed them to complete the task of comparing the two sources to accomplish this question of the examination. Students referred to and integrated both sources for the development of relevant and thorough speech samples.

Some students read directly from the printed source; others had labored or halting expression and poor pronunciation. In some cases, lack of control of language undermined the ability to develop the topic and complete the task. Conversely, command of the language did not enable some students to rise into the high range if they only partially addressed the task.

In this particular task, some students had difficulties remembering the names of the athletes, the sport that each one practiced, and their different attitudes toward competing, factors, which lead to some confusion and inaccuracies in the information presented by the students. Some vocabulary may have been new to students, such as “*taekwondin*,” as it may have been the fact that the locations, Sinaloa and La Brecha, were not identified in the text as specifically from Mexico.

The stimuli contained some idiomatic expressions that were not familiar to the students. The audio source was a fast-paced interview. The content and points of view expressed in the 2013 stimuli were accessible, but the comparison and contrast task required a higher degree of subtlety.

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?

- Simulate of the testing environment during the course of the year to familiarize students with the format of the exam.
- Students, teachers, and proctors should be familiar with the operation of the equipment and with the exam protocol prior to the actual exam.
- Incorporate the teaching skills and techniques for comparing and contrasting ideas presented in the sources without direct quotations. Use of graphic organizers is encouraged.
- Reemphasize reading for meaning, and work with students on their ability to speak in their own words, rather than reading from the text.
- Practice presentational speaking so that students are aware of the proper register required of a formal presentation.
- Provide opportunities for students to hear and to read authentic sources representing all Spanish-speaking countries. These may include films, documentaries, speeches, interviews, online newspapers, and magazines, among other sources.