



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2014 AP® Italian Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Giuseppe Cavatorta of the University of Arizona in Tucson. 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

##### *What was the intent of this question?*

The Course Theme for the E-mail Reply task was *Identità privata e pubblica*, and it required students to use the formal register to respond to two questions from an employee of the Centro di Ricerca sull'Emigrazione Italiana about their interest in visiting and researching at the Centro. Students needed to answer two questions: (1) Why are you interested in Italian migration? and (2) Which aspects of Italian migration do you plan to research at our Institution? Finally, the students had to ask for further details about something mentioned in the original email.

##### *How well did students perform on this question?*

The mean score for the Standard Group<sup>1</sup> was 2.51 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.76. Both the Standard Group and Total Group performance on this task were statistically the lowest of all four free-response tasks.

##### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

- Most students maintained an exchange appropriate to the task, but many failed to seek additional details.
- Many students responded with sufficient elaboration and some with frequent and detailed elaboration. A few provided elaboration that was not appropriate to the task (off topic).
- Many responses lacked accuracy and control of grammar, though they provided all the required information within the context of the task.

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<sup>1</sup> The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Italian at home or who have lived for one month or more in a country where Italian is the native language. Decisions about score distributions are based on the Standard Group.

- A few responses demonstrated limited to little control of grammar (in particular recurring problems were subject-verb agreement, adjective-noun agreement, confusion between future and conditional, and unsuccessful attempts to use the comparative and the superlative).
- There were numerous successful attempts to use complex structures such as hypothetical clauses, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, etc.
- Many responses lacked varied vocabulary, though most contained appropriate vocabulary. Many responses contained spelling errors.
- There was abundant confusion of vocabulary (*ragioni, regioni; laboratorio* interpreted as being a scientific reference).
- Often students used an inappropriate register, mostly in the e-mail's body and in the closing.
- There was a noticeable lack of idiomatic language, though that did not detract from responses that were fully understandable and contained frequent elaboration. Sometimes, when idiomatic language was used, it was not appropriate for formal correspondence, but consisted of obviously memorized phrases.
- Though second language interference is not in the scoring guidelines specifically, many Readers noted a fairly frequent occurrence of it.
- The vast majority of respondents put their first and last names in their closing.

***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 are already accustomed to responding to e-mails, but most of these involve interpersonal writing with friends in which the familiar register is used. This task, however, required the use of the formal register.

Teachers should do the following to help students improve their performance:

- Guide students through the task's instructions and ensure that they know all its requirements.
- Explain the scoring guidelines for the task.
- Prepare simulated e-mail reply writing tasks for periodic practice under actual exam conditions, and score these practice responses using the scoring guidelines.
- Employ the six overarching themes in the construction of this exercise.
- Keep in mind that the skills required for successful completion of an AP® language exam are skills that should be cultivated from the very beginning levels of language study. In the case of the E-mail Reply, practice can begin as early as in the first year of Italian through easy tasks (write to a friend or to a pen-pal; introduce yourself; ask questions; etc.), so that students' e-mails can gradually, over the course of several years, acquire the level of complexity necessary for the AP® task.

## **Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The Course Theme for the Persuasive Essay task was *Scienza e tecnologia*, and the task concerned the habit of freely downloading digital files from the Internet. It presented a written text about changes in the music industry that will soon bring about a complete new way of accessing songs: music will be available everywhere via streaming, for free or for a very small fee. It contained a graph with data about the changes between 2007 and 2010 in young Italians' spending habits at the cinema, for music and books, and on the Internet. Finally, an audio text presented the problems that piracy causes for the music and movie industries, and new ways to fight it.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.98 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.23. The Standard Group performed best on both this task and the Conversation of all four free-response tasks on the exam.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Some students were not prepared to write a persuasive essay with clarity and accuracy. The following are some of the common problems experienced by students:

- The topic was not effectively treated within the context of the task (e.g., the essay did not address all three sources while presenting its own perspective).
- The specifics of the prompt were not addressed, and instead the topic was discussed in general terms.
- The essay did not demonstrate an understanding of the distinct points of view of the sources and the information contained in them and make specific references to each one.
- Content from all three sources was not integrated to support a thesis. Essays often cited or identified only one or two sources and gave few specific details.
- Viewpoints were not presented clearly and coherently together with a persuasive argument and substantive examples.
- Essays did not cite sources or elaborate on the pertinence of the evidence being marshaled in support of an argument.
- Lengthy summaries of the sources were written without effectively using the sources' information in support of a particular viewpoint.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including complex grammatical structures such as subordinate clauses and contrary-to-fact structures. There were also frequent errors in subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement.
- Many essays did not contain well-developed paragraphs that used both simple and compound sentences.

### ***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> 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 presentational writing task may be unfamiliar to many students. It requires a careful integration of three distinct sources of information (written text, graphic, and audio) along with the student's expression of his or her own point of view. Responding to this task is complex and requires students to have some practice with authentic materials. The Teachers' Resources section of the AP<sup>®</sup> Central site offers a large number of such materials.

Students need practice in writing essays in which they have to refer to three separate sources as well as express their own opinion on a specific subject. It is important to tell students to carefully read the prompt and remember that their essay is above all a response to a prompt and that the information in the three sources should serve to support their answer to that prompt. Students should also spend some time outlining their essay prior to writing it.

An emphasis on authentic materials, defined as materials produced by native speakers of Italian for native speakers of Italian, is evident in this task, which contains an authentic text, graphic, and audio text. Teachers should introduce such materials into their classrooms so that students can become familiar with them.

It would be helpful to refer students to both the student samples and the scoring guidelines posted on AP<sup>®</sup> Central so that they can see actual examples of essays from the 2012–2014 exams. Teachers should discuss the sample essays with students so that they have a clear idea of how the scoring guidelines are applied.

Students need practice in writing essays that reflects the actual exam conditions. They should develop a habit of giving their essays a final proofreading for common grammatical problem areas such as subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, the use of the subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling, the use of transitional elements, staying on task, and the use of paragraphs.

Finally, it is important for Italian teachers to participate in Workshops and/or Summer Institutes so as to glean information about the task and then disseminate it to their students. It is imperative that students be aware of how the task works and how to complete it successfully on the day of the AP<sup>®</sup> Exam.

### **Question 3**

#### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This task assessed speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students 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 five turns in the conversation. The series of five 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 "*Famiglia e società*." For this task, students needed to respond to five audio prompts spoken by Marcello, a student volunteering with the non-profit organization I Cantieri della Solidarietà.

1. Marcello greets the student and asks how the student learned about I Cantieri della Solidarietà. Students had to respond to the question.
2. Marcello asks whether the student has had other experiences in volunteering or not. Students had to provide information.
3. Marcello explains the various kinds of work that I Cantieri della Solidarietà does and asks the student where he would like to go and what he would prefer to do. Students had to express their preferences.
4. Marcello asks how the student would feel about living in another country for several weeks. Students had to express their point of view.
5. Marcello talks about advantages and disadvantages of the program and asks if the student has any questions for him. Students had to ask for clarification about something.

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.98 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.30. The Standard Group performed as well on this task as on the Persuasive Essay, and the Total Group performed best on this task of all four free-response tasks on the exam.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Students need to engage in activities that promote the ability to respond to dialogic situations in a natural and appropriate fashion in line with the give-and-take of a speech event.

- Some conversations did not consist of an exchange appropriate to the task.
- Some conversations did not provide appropriate information, such as how a student would adapt to life in another country, or did not contain further questions about *I Cantieri della Solidarietà*.
- There was a lack of comprehensibility and clarity of expression.

- Some conversations employed elementary vocabulary instead of varied and rich vocabulary and idiomatic language.
- There was a lack of accuracy and variety in grammar, syntax, and usage, including errors of agreement (subject-verb, noun-adjective), misuse of articles (“*la programma*”), a lack of subordinate clauses, incorrect usage, and errors in word order.

***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 following suggestions would be useful for teachers to implement in order to familiarize students with this task:

- Although students speak in class, they may not have practice in sustained dialogues, as this task requires. It would be useful to familiarize students with various types of speech interactions (greetings, responses to questions, queries for information, leave-taking, providing details in response to increasingly complex prompts, etc.).
- Students should read and listen very carefully to the instructions concerning how to respond to the task, making connections between what they hear and what is written in the directions for the conversation.
- It is important that students practice this part of the exam with the equipment that will be used during the actual administration. Students should have practice responding to a series of five prompts, including ones that require them to initiate an exchange, such as by asking a question.
- Students need to develop a sense of how to respond in 20 seconds. This sort of practice needs to occur throughout the academic year.
- Students need to listen carefully to the prompt and say something relevant in response, even if what they say is brief.
- Students need to practice listening to a wide variety of male and female voices. Appropriate audio clips from various media would be useful for students both in and outside of the classroom. Many of these materials are easily accessible on the Internet, and AP® Central has a list of links to useful audio materials.
- The speaking component in the classroom should not be solely focused on the conversation task. Rather, a variety of activities should be introduced into the curriculum, such as interviews and debates. Students need to be prepared to respond spontaneously to different situations. This will also improve students’ fluency and confidence in their own linguistic abilities. At the same time, instructors need to pay attention to teaching verb tenses, increasing vocabulary, and so forth. Successful self-correction of an error is always viewed favorably.

It is vital that student responses are recorded properly, regardless of whether cassettes or digital recordings are used. To ensure that this happens, teachers should take the following steps:

- Prior to the exam, work with school authorities and the proctor to ensure that there will be no distracting noises while students are recording.
- Because it is important to ensure that the proctor knows how to administer the speaking section of the exam, review the relevant guidelines with the proctor well in advance of the administration.
- Common problems include too much background noise, recording at the wrong speed, recording on the wrong track, and recordings being cut off in mid-response. A final equipment test just prior to the administration of the speaking section is a good practice.
- Remind students not to stop and start their machines while recording. Students should follow directions and start, pause, or stop the recorder only when told to do so; they should not pause or stop the recorder between individual questions.

- Prior to the exam, take students to the speaking administration room and familiarize them with the equipment (some of them have never seen a cassette, and even CDs are becoming obsolete).
- Check to see how CDs are burned using the school's equipment and, after the exam has been administered, check all the recorded materials before shipping.

#### **Question 4**

##### *What was the intent of this question?*

The Course Theme for the Cultural Comparison task was *Bellezza ed estetica*. The task consisted of a question asking the student to discuss the importance of dressing fashionably in their community. In their oral presentations, students had to compare the topic in that context with the topic in an Italian context with which they are familiar.

##### *How well did students perform on this question?*

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.65 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.92. Both the Standard Group and the Total Group performed better on this task than on the E-mail Reply, but worse on this task than on the other two free-response tasks.

##### *What were common student errors or omissions?*

The following are some of the common errors, omissions, or problems experienced by students:

- Responses did not effectively treat the topic within the context of the task.
- Responses were conducted in general terms and made no reference to any culture/community.
- Responses did not provide a clear comparison between the student's community and some aspect of the target culture and did not offer supporting details and pertinent examples.
- Responses did not demonstrate a complete understanding of the Italian context to which students were comparing their own culture.
- Responses did not consist of an organized presentation with a clear and orderly comparison of the two communities.
- Responses demonstrated an inability to verbalize a comprehensible response with ease and clarity of expression, and instead provided a series of disjointed words, phrases, or expressions that lacked cohesion and clarity.
- Responses did not contain varied and accurate grammar, syntax, and usage; frequent grammatical and syntactic errors made comprehension difficult.
- A lack of correct pronunciation, intonation, and pacing impeded comprehension.
- Successful self-correction was lacking, or self-correction did not clarify a response so as to enhance comprehension (e.g., an attempt to self-correct merely repeated an incorrect word or phrase).
- In lieu of focusing on the actual prompt, some responses merely referred to beauty because the Course Theme of this task was "*Bellezza ed estetica*."

##### *Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> 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 to remember that they must address all aspects of this task by making clear comparisons between their community and a community belonging to the target culture and must include accurate and appropriate examples. Likewise, linguistic aspects are important (pronunciation, intonation, pacing, register, grammar, syntax, usage, lexicon, and idiomatic expressions). Due to the anxiety and pressure that students may experience during the exam, it could be difficult for them to manage their time; thus, teachers could suggest that students start their presentations by developing the topic within the Italian

culture and, if they run out of time, recur to rhetorical strategies that might help establish the comparison with their own country/community. Because this is the only part of the exam where students are asked to demonstrate their knowledge of Italian culture, a comparison that focuses on details about the target culture generally receives a better score than a comparison made the other way around. It would benefit students to instruct them to utilize T charts to highlight differences and similarities between the two cultures regarding a specific theme. However, students have to be constantly reminded that producing two lists corresponding to the two cultures is not sufficient for performing well on this task. A clear comparison must be made. So again, rhetorical strategies should be taught to link similarities and contrast differences. Also, because Task 4 is a presentation, good organization is valuable. A good organization makes the message more understandable. Finally, teachers should train their students to optimize the time they have (4 minutes) by carefully reading the prompt (the “*Argomento della relazione*” and not the “*Tema del corso*”) and preparing their presentation. Writing down key words or important aspects they want to touch on will provide them with an outline for their presentations and make them feel more comfortable.

Teachers should be attentive to the following points:

- Instruct students to read and follow the instructions very carefully.
- Provide models of comparisons between one’s home community and the target culture. This might include food, cities, transportation, and so forth.
- Provide actual timed testing situations based on exemplary test questions. The responses should be recorded, and those replies should be scored in accordance with the scoring guidelines.
- Help students become familiar with the equipment to be used during the administration of the actual exam.
- Expose students to as many authentic materials as possible. Devise out-of-class activities that involve exposure to authentic textual and audio materials.

In general, for all of the questions on the exam, the most important suggestion for improving students’ performance is to offer constant practice during AP<sup>®</sup> courses by providing examples from previous exams. The AP<sup>®</sup> should be the final step of a well-built curriculum that integrates the interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive modes within a cultural context. These are all necessary skills that should be gradually developed in a well-articulated curriculum, with the AP<sup>®</sup> course and exam being the culmination of the study of a language.