



Student Performance Q&A:

2007 AP® Japanese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP® Japanese Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Laurel Rasplica Rodd of the University of Colorado in Boulder. 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 evaluates writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated exchange of text-chat messages. It comprises a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic and six questions. Each question consists of a chat entry in Japanese and a brief direction in English, which provides guidance on how to answer. Students have 90 seconds to read the question and respond at each turn in the conversation. Each of the six responses receives a holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; all six scores count equally in calculating the total score.

The 2007 exam directed students to participate in an exchange of text-chat messages with Hirosuke Sato, their host family father, about their upcoming stay with the Sato family.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 18.04 out of a possible 36 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 21.55. These tasks proved moderately difficult for students, who had to adjust their writing to the appropriate style and register, as well as respond appropriately to a variety of questions.

* The Standard Group does not include students who hear or speak Japanese at home or who have lived for 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?

Common student errors included not using the appropriate register and style with Mr. Sato, the host family father whom they had not met. Some students misinterpreted polite expressions used by Mr. Sato, such as お聞きしたいんですが, and so responded inappropriately. Many students seemed not to understand the meaning of なぜ and failed to respond with a reason. Some students had difficulty in responding to the question that asked them to provide a comparison (肉と魚とどちらが好きですか), and many neglected to provide a reason for their preference. Inability to read some of the kanji included in the prompts led some students to misinterpret Mr. Sato's questions and comments.

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 should read very carefully the instructions on how to respond, remembering to respond as fully and as appropriately as possible each time it is their turn. They should keep in mind the context of the text chat and be sure to use the appropriate register and style. Students should pay careful attention to the English instructions that accompany each of the interlocutor's written comments: in this particular text chat, there were instructions to "give some examples," "give an explanation," "justify your opinion," and "ask some specific questions" in response to Mr. Sato's text messages. Some students provided minimal responses that did not follow these instructions and thus did not fully address the prompt.

Students seemed to have difficulty understanding some question words, such as なぜ, and phrases, such as について and お聞きしたいんです. Many failed to form the comparison correctly or were unable to give reasons for what they wanted to do in Japan. Additionally, many students were unable to ask an appropriate question about the Sato family.

Presentational Writing Task 1: Compare and Contrast Article

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write an article for the student newspaper of a school in Japan. It consists of a single prompt, which identifies two related topics and details how they should be discussed in the article. Students are given 20 minutes to write an article of 300–400 characters or longer. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task.

In 2007 students were asked to compare and contrast communicating by telephone and communicating by e-mail. They were asked to describe, based on personal experience, three aspects of each mode of communication, highlighting similarities and differences. They were also asked to state their preference and give reasons for it.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.91 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.66. This task proved moderately difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students chose not to respond to the prompt, which directed them to write an article, comparing communicating by telephone and communicating by e-mail, and instead wrote on a topic of their own choosing. Students must respond to the prompt and write on the appropriate topic in order to receive credit for their responses. Some students were unable to compare and contrast three aspects of communication by telephone and by e-mail. Other students were able to compare these modes of communication, but their essays showed a lack of organization and were marred by the absence of cohesive devices. Still other students neglected to state their own preferences and the reasons for them. Lack of vocabulary made it difficult for some students to express their ideas, as did inadequate grasp of grammar. Students sometimes erred in selecting kanji when using the conversion function in Japanese word processing, leading to passages that were difficult to comprehend. Other students failed to use the conversion function and used too much hiragana.

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 should be reminded 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 to organize their thoughts. Teachers should spend time helping students develop a range of appropriate conjunctions, cohesive devices, transitional elements, and ways of organizing and connecting ideas into paragraph-length discourse. Failure to use complex structures (such as relative clauses, comparative structures, and explanatory phrases) appropriately often marred presentational writing. Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms frequently led to repetition of basic and common vocabulary (often used inappropriately) or to interference from another language.

Presentational Writing Task 2: Cultural Topic Posting

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the presentational communicative mode by requiring students to write a posting on a cultural topic in a Web forum for students of Japanese. It consists of a single prompt, which identifies a cultural topic, directs the students to select an example of that topic, and details how the example should be discussed in the posting. Students are allotted 20 minutes to write a posting of 300–400 characters or longer. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; in addition to language skills, the score reflects the cultural knowledge exhibited in the response.

The prompt on the 2007 exam instructed students to select an example of a Japanese gift-giving practice, to describe in detail at least three characteristics of that custom, and to express their opinion or feelings about the gift-giving practice.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.48 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.31. This task proved relatively difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although the prompt asked students to write a posting on gift-giving practices in Japan, some students wrote about gift-giving practices in other countries. Still others compared gift-giving practices in Japan to those in other countries, adding considerably to the challenge of completing the posting in the given amount of time. Many students neglected to include their own opinion or feelings about the gift-giving practice. Additionally, many postings showed a lack of organization and were marred by the absence of cohesive devices. Lack of vocabulary made it difficult for some students to express their ideas, as did inadequate grasp of grammar. Students sometimes erred in selecting kanji when using the conversion function in Japanese word processing, leading to passages that were difficult to comprehend. Other students failed to use the conversion function and used too much hiragana.

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 should be reminded 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. Teachers should spend time helping students develop a range of appropriate conjunctions, cohesive devices, transitional elements, and ways of organizing and connecting ideas into paragraph-length discourse. Failure to use complex structures (such as relative clauses, comparative structures, and explanatory phrases) appropriately often marred presentational writing. Lack of rich vocabulary and idioms often led to repetition of basic and common vocabulary (often used inappropriately) or to interference from another language. Students need to have a broad enough introduction to Japanese culture to be able to describe aspects of that culture, such as gift giving, accurately and to express an opinion about them.

Interpersonal Speaking Task 1: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task evaluates speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students respond as part of a simulated conversation. It comprises a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic and four questions. Students have 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the four responses receives a holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; all four scores count equally in calculating the total score.

The prompt on the 2007 exam directed students to engage in a conversation with Naoto Moriyama, a representative from a youth center, about student activities. They were expected to respond appropriately to an expression of appreciation, to express a preference, to explain that preference, and to describe a topic on which they could speak at the youth center.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 8.94 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 12.16. This task proved quite difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students had difficulty with the level of discourse and the range of vocabulary required for this conversation about student activities with Mr. Moriyama, a representative of a youth center. The task required ready responses to set phrases (初めまして、ありがとうございました), expression of a preference (for volunteering or part-time work), explanation of the preference, and description of a possible topic for a talk. Many students had trouble with one or more of these communicative functions.

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 should practice using set phrases until they are automatic, and they should also practice elaborating appropriately using a variety of levels of discourse. Ability to express a preference and to give a reason seemed to be difficult for many students. Practice in recognizing polite language (such as お答えくださいまして) and responding politely will also improve performance

Interpersonal Speaking Task 2: Return Telephone Call

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses students' speaking abilities in the interpersonal communicative mode by having them respond as part of a simulated telephone conversation. It comprises a voice message for students to listen to, followed by the conversation, which includes four questions. Students have 20 seconds to speak at each turn in the conversation. Each of the four responses receives a holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; all four scores count equally in calculating the total score.

The prompt on the 2007 exam required listening to a message from Ms. Imamura, who stated that a problem had arisen and asked students to call as soon as they received the message.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 7.9 out of a possible 24 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 11.95. This task proved quite difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students had difficulty with either the set phrases appropriate to a telephone conversation, or the context of this particular conversation, or both. Others seem to have understood the context but were unable to provide appropriate expressions of concern or sympathy in response to the emotions expressed by Ms. Imamura, the interlocutor. Some students did not recognize that they were being asked for advice or assistance, or they were unable to formulate a recommendation.

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 should have many opportunities to practice set phrases appropriate to phone conversations with a variety of interlocutors, as well as appropriate expressions of various emotions. Students also need opportunities to give advice, express concern for people, and show support of others' activities.

Presentational Speaking Task 1: School Announcement

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses students' abilities to speak in the presentational communicative mode by having them deliver an announcement to an assembly of visiting Japanese students. The prompt consists of notes in English about what to include in the announcement. Students are given one minute to prepare the announcement and one minute to deliver it. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task.

On the 2007 exam, students were instructed to deliver an announcement about the time, date, and location of an upcoming haiku contest and a solicitation for volunteer judges.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.57 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.16. This task proved relatively difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students neglected to include an appropriate opening or closing remark or both. In addition, this task required accurate statement of dates, times, and locations, all of which gave some students trouble. Many students had difficulty organizing their announcements and providing appropriate transitional elements. Others lacked adequate vocabulary and resorted to use of another language. Some students attempted sight translation of the notes instead of using them to structure a coherent announcement in Japanese.

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 should practice appropriate opening and concluding remarks for use in presentations of various sorts. They also need to have a solid grasp of days of the week, dates, times, and numbers and counters to accomplish this task. Practice in linking sentences smoothly and providing appropriate transitions will help students to successfully complete this task.

Presentational Speaking Task 2: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task measures the ability to speak in the presentational communicative mode by asking students to narrate a story to a Japanese class. It contains a series of pictures that depict a story. Students are allotted four minutes to prepare the narration and two minutes to tell the story. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task.

The 2007 exam contained four pictures illustrating scenes in a Japanese restaurant and on the street outside the restaurant. They show a businessman eating, paying with a large bill, forgetting his change, and having it returned to him.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.97 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.76. This task proved moderately difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student errors included inconsistent use of desu/masu style and lack of transitional elements. The absence of appropriate cohesive devices from sentence to sentence often led to presentation of scattershot bits of information. Other difficulties included a lack of rich vocabulary and idioms and inability to correctly produce complex sentences. Some students rushed through the narration and did not fully use the time allotted to elaborate on their narration or to provide details. Some students had difficulty integrating dialogue into their narrations; others relied too heavily on dialogue and neglected narration and description.

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 need the opportunity to exercise their imaginations in creating and narrating stories, as well as practice using cohesive elements and transitions. They should also practice integrating description, dialogue, and narration. Practice in expanding simple sentences to complex sentences by use of conjunctions and other grammatical devices would be helpful, as would exposure to a broad range of topics and the vocabulary appropriate to different situations.

Presentational Speaking Task 3: Cultural Perspective Presentation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses students' speaking skills in the presentational communicative mode by requiring them to make a presentation on a cultural topic to a Japanese class. It consists of a single prompt, which identifies a cultural topic and details how it should be discussed in the presentation. Students are given four minutes to prepare the presentation and two minutes for its delivery. The response receives a single, holistic score, based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task; in addition to language skills, the score reflects the cultural knowledge exhibited in the response.

The prompt on the 2007 exam directed students to present their own view or perspective on Japanese customs related to the house and its rooms. They were to begin with an appropriate introduction, discuss at least five aspects of Japanese customs, and end with a concluding remark.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.46 out of a possible 6 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.08. This task proved comparatively difficult for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students focused their attention on a comparison of Japanese customs with those of other countries rather than directly addressing the prompt, which required a presentation of their own views or perspectives on Japanese customs related to the house and its rooms. Some responses lacked organization, or did not completely address the prompt, or attempted to address other topics in addition to the prompt. Further, some students exhibited a lack of knowledge of Japanese culture or were unable to express a view or perspective on Japanese customs. Other common problems were a lack of transitional elements or cohesive devices, inability to use complex grammatical structures correctly, and lack of 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?

Students should be encouraged to address the requirements of the prompt directly and to outline their ideas before beginning to speak to ensure that they address all aspects of the prompt in an organized oral presentation. Students need adequate exposure to Japanese customs, as well as opportunities to practice describing those customs and expressing their own viewpoints about them. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to practice structuring their oral presentations with appropriate introductory and concluding remarks. They also need practice in using transitional elements and cohesive devices and building from simple to complex sentences.