

Student Performance Q&A:

2009 AP[®] Chinese Language and Culture Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP[®] Chinese Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Tao-chung Yao of the University of Hawaii, Manoa. 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.

Presentational Writing Task: Story Narration

What was the intent of this task?

This task tests writing in the presentational communicative mode by having the student narrate a story to a friend. It comprises a series of four pictures that depict a story. The student is allotted 15 minutes to write the narration. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task. The purpose of this question is to determine whether students can write a well-organized story with a clear progression of ideas (a beginning, middle, and end), including as many details as possible. It also gives them a chance to demonstrate their ability to use appropriate transitional elements and cohesive devices, as well as their command of sentence structure and vocabulary.

This year's pictures showed a family (father, mother, and son) moving into a new condo. While the father and son are carrying a television up the stairs, they accidentally drop it. As they dispose of the broken TV, the father worries that it will cost a lot of money to replace, but the son is looking forward to having a new flat-screen TV. The final picture shows all three family members watching the new TV in their new living room.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 3.52 out of a possible 6 points, lower than the mean scores in 2008 (3.57) and 2007 (3.62). The mean score for the Total Group was 4.40, higher than the mean in 2008 (4.15) but almost the same as the mean in 2007 (4.41).

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

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common errors were typographical, especially instances of an inappropriate character with the same or similar pronunciation as a different character that would have been appropriate in the given context. One point worth mentioning is that students interpreted this year's story in a variety of ways. Instead of seeing the three people in the pictures as a family, which was the typical interpretation, some students thought the people were friends, and some thought that the two men in the pictures were workers from a moving company. Such differing interpretations were not considered to be errors, and no students were penalized for not interpreting the three people as a family or for offering different interpretations.

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 familiarize their students with the AP Scoring Guidelines and also remind students that their story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. To this end, a good strategy for students is to be sure to incorporate into the narration all four pictures, including the various details in the pictures. Students should also pay attention to the natural and logical flow from one picture to the next and use appropriate transitional expressions to link their sentences together.

Interpersonal Writing Task: E-Mail Response

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student write an e-mail message in response to one received from a friend. Students are allotted 15 minutes to write the response. The response receives a single holistic score based on how well it accomplishes the assigned task. Students must be able first to comprehend the e-mail and then to write a response, addressing all the questions raised in the e-mail.

This year's e-mail was sent by Meimei, a high school student who wishes to go to China to study in the summer. Her mother thinks that she is too young and has asked her to wait until she has entered college. Meimei asks for her friend's opinion about high school students studying abroad. She also asks her friend to offer suggestions on how to convince her mother to let her participate in the study-abroad program.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 4.45 out of a possible 6 points, lower than the mean in 2008 (4.62) but higher than the mean in 2007 (3.86). The mean score for the Total Group was 5.32, lower than the mean in 2008 (5.37) but higher than the mean in 2007 (4.81).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Again, the most common errors were typographical. Another problem was failing to respond to all parts of the prompt. The prompt clearly asks students to make suggestions to help Meimei convince her mother to allow her to go to China to study, but many students only gave their opinions about studying abroad without offering any suggestions. Some students closed the e-mail with very formal language; since the e-mail was addressed to a friend, there was no need to write so formally.

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 need to remind students to read the instructions for and content of the prompt very carefully. Otherwise, they may fail to address all aspects of the prompt.

Interpersonal Speaking Task: Conversation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses speaking in the interpersonal communicative mode by having the student respond as part of a simulated conversation. It consists of a statement identifying an interlocutor and conversation topic followed by six questions. Students are allotted 20 seconds to speak 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. Students need to speak clearly with good pronunciation and make sure that their answer addresses the prompt directly and is culturally appropriate.

This year's conversation was with Cheng Lilan, a reporter for a Chinese newspaper, about the student's experience studying Chinese.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 23.06 out of a possible 36 points, higher than the mean scores in 2008 (20.54) and 2007 (21.39). The mean score for the Total Group was 29.58, higher than the mean scores in 2008 (27.6) and 2007 (27.51).

One possible reason for this year's higher performance could be the theme of the conversation, which was about a student's experience studying Chinese. This was a topic that all students were familiar with and could talk about. The only difficult prompt was number 4, but poor performance on this one question alone did not decrease a student's total score very much.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common problem was not providing details. Many students gave appropriate but very short answers without any elaboration. Organizing their thoughts and answering the question as fully as possible in 20 seconds was also challenging for students.

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 had 20 seconds to answer each question, but many answers were either very short, sometimes less than 10 seconds, or too long to fit within 20 seconds. Teachers need to help their students learn to answer questions under pressure from time constraints and to manage the 20-second time limit effectively.

The instructions for the conversation task clearly stated, “You should respond as fully and as appropriately as possible.” However, many students responded to the question minimally and did not try to elaborate. Teachers need to help students learn how to provide details when engaging in a conversation.

Presentational Speaking Task: Cultural Presentation

What was the intent of this task?

This task assesses speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having students make a presentation on a cultural topic to a Chinese class. It consists of a single prompt that identifies a cultural topic and directs students to select an example of that topic, describe it, and explain what makes it significant. Students are allotted 4 minutes to prepare the presentation and 2 minutes to deliver the presentation. 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.

This year’s task asked students to choose one Chinese art form (calligraphy, Beijing Opera, paper cutting, etc.), describe it, and explain its significance.

How well did students perform on this task?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 3.65 out of a possible 6 points, higher than the mean scores in 2008 (3.58) and 2007 (3.34). The mean score for the Total Group was 4.60, higher than the mean scores in 2008 (4.51) and 2007 (4.23).

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common omission was a discussion of the significance of the chosen art form. Many students only described the art form without mentioning anything about its significance.

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 need to remind students to read the prompt carefully. Since the cultural presentation task appears on the AP Exam every year, teachers should provide their students with in-class opportunities to answer questions on Chinese culture. Teachers can ask students first to describe one aspect of Chinese culture and then to explain its significance.

Some teachers are concerned that their students will need to memorize a lot of cultural information and trivial details to be well prepared for the cultural presentation task. For AP Chinese, students need only to have some basic knowledge of Chinese culture. It would be unrealistic to expect students to know a great many details about every aspect of Chinese culture. Teachers should instead focus on training their students to present basic cultural information clearly and in a well-organized manner.