



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® Spanish Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 free-response questions for AP® Spanish Language were written by the Chief Reader, Gustavo Fares of Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis. These comments provide an overview of each free-response question, explain how students performed on the question, and describe 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.

Part A-1: Interpersonal Writing

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to measure students' ability to compose a message with proper register while responding appropriately to all five parts of the prompt. Students had 10 minutes to read the prompt and write a response that was at least 60 words in length. The task was to imagine they were writing a postcard to a family with whom they were going to spend time while participating in a home stay and study visit in Quito, Ecuador. In the message students needed to greet the family, explain why they wanted to study abroad, inquire about Quito, express their feelings about the study program and trip, and say good-bye. Responses were scored on effective task completion and topic development in one category and language use in the second category.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group* was 2.61 out of a possible 5 points, slightly lower than the mean score of 2.90 in 2010. For the Total Group the mean score was 2.88, compared with 3.21 in 2010.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although the elements of the task were clearly indicated in the prompt, many students did not understand that they were going to Quito in the future. For a number of students, there seemed to be some confusion as to whom they were writing to, why they were writing, and where the family

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

was located. These students did well on the five bullets but missed the intent of the prompt. Students used a variety of vocabulary for greeting, saying why they wanted to study abroad, and expressing feelings about the program and the trip. Students had some difficulty verifying information about Quito. Most of the questions about Quito were indirectly asked as opposed to forming the question directly.

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?

- Throughout the year simulate this question by creating a variety of interpersonal writing tasks 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.

Part A-2: Presentational Writing

What was the intent of this question?

This question is an example of the presentational mode of writing and a task that integrates the skills of reading, listening and writing. The intent of the question was to assess students' abilities to interpret and synthesize different sources. Students were told to use information from all the sources to support their ideas in a formal essay. The instructions, in both English and Spanish, asked them to clearly identify the sources as they used them in their answers. Students were also advised to avoid simply summarizing the sources individually. They had 7 minutes to read the printed material, and they listened to an 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.

Students were asked to understand, organize and synthesize information from three different sources into a cohesively written response to a prompt about the impact of the use of the bicycle in different parts of the world, referred to in the sources as various places in Europe, in Bilbao, and in Bogotá, Colombia. The first print article was titled "Por Europa en dos ruedas." The second print source was titled "Jóvenes sobre dos ruedas." The third source was a rerecorded audio file entitled "Ciclovia," adapted from an article on a website. Responses 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 2.63 out of a possible 5 points. This was somewhat lower than the mean score of 2.77 in 2010. The mean score for the Total Group was 2.68, which was slightly lower than the mean score of 2.88 in 2010.

The total mean score on the writing portion of the exam (both interpersonal and presentational) for the Standard Group was 5.24 out of a possible 10 points, which was slightly lower than the mean score of 5.67 in 2010. For the Total Group the mean score on the writing portion was 5.56, slightly lower than the mean score of 6.08 in 2010.

The language required to answer the prompt was of reasonably high frequency. Many students used the information, vocabulary and structures from the first source as well as their prior knowledge of bicycles and biking to write detailed essays of considerable length.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common error was the extensive use of prior knowledge on bicycles, citing one, two or all three sources in answering the question yet omitting to synthesize the information from those sources. That is, in many instances students used outside knowledge as opposed to the specific information and viewpoints provided in the sources. As a result, the most common error was misinterpreting the three sources, especially the ways in which they were interrelated.

Another common error was overreliance on one of the printed sources. Some students provided minimal reference to the two other sources. When citing or referring to the sources, many students simply copied from the print sources or misinterpreted the information or statistics from the sources, making it difficult to determine whether the language was the student's or that of the texts. Many students also organized their essays according to the order of the sources instead of using the first source as the synthesis of the topic and citing examples from the two other sources as support for the synthesis.

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 will benefit from practice with as many authentic sources as possible. In particular, practice with a variety of audio sources is an excellent idea because relating the information from the audio source presents a difficulty for some students. In these practice sessions, help students focus on understanding the gist or essence of the audio source while taking brief notes. Of course, this suggestion is not limited to practice with the audio sources alone; routine practice with printed sources is important as well. Throughout the year it is a good idea to give students presentational writing assignments that include two printed sources and one audio source, under the constraints of the actual exam.
- 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.
- Assist students by discussing and illustrating the differences between summary and synthesis. It is also always helpful to reinforce general essay-writing skills, such as prewriting, editing and proofreading.

Part B-1: Interpersonal Speaking

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 that 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 five elicited responses they were to give as fully and appropriately as possible. A change in the instructions this year stated that students were expected to use all the response time (20 seconds) to speak during each of their five interventions.

The simulated conversation required the student to respond to a message left on the answering machine from a friend, Juana, who asked the student to return her calculator, which she believed she had lent to the student. The conversation then developed into an invitation to Juana's birthday party, which the student was supposed to decline, and then an alternative activity. The student was then asked to confirm the plan and say good-bye. Responses were scored on task completion, topic development and language use.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.47 out of a possible 5 points, lower than the 3.10 score in 2010. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.46, compared with 3.93 in 2010.

The ideas presented in this simulated conversation were much like those in a typical student conversation. The majority of responses indicated that students were able to respond appropriately and accomplish the task because the vocabulary was familiar to students. Since the conversation moved in several different directions, students were often able to include a greater range of vocabulary. The situation allowed students to demonstrate correct social and cultural references. The prompts reflected a variety of verb tenses (present, preterit, future), though there was an absence of the use of past tense. The prompts also included and encouraged the use of object pronouns.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As in past exams, there was a change in the direction of the conversation. This year the change of topics took place in the second response, when Juana realizes that Julio is the one to whom she has lent the calculator. This seemed to challenge many students, who became confused and continued to talk about not having the calculator.

A common error was misinterpretation of the verb *presté* (I lent, I borrowed). Problems with consistency in proper register and the recycling of the vocabulary in the prompts were evident in many student samples.

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 this task throughout the year by creating similar telephone conversations 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. Just as students check to see if they have properly recorded a cassette, the students and technical personnel should check to see if the answers have been properly recorded on the CD.

Part B-2: Presentational Speaking

What was the intent of this question?

The second part of the speaking portion is 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 their answers. A change in the instructions this year stated that students were expected to use all the response time to speak.

Students were asked to compare the ideas expressed in two sources about health. The printed source, which appeared on the website of Univisión in 2010, was titled “El ejercicio cuida tu físico y tu cabeza. Cuida tu salud, aléjate del sedentarismo.” The auditory source, titled “Desayunar mal provoca estrés,” was broadcast on RTVE on October 22, 2008. Responses 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 3.08 out of a possible 5 points, which was slightly higher than the 2010 mean score of 2.76. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.39 compared with 3.07 in 2010.

For the Standard Group, the total mean score on the speaking (interpersonal and presentational) portion of the exam was 5.55 out of 10 possible points, compared with 5.86 in 2010. The total mean score for speaking (interpersonal and presentational) for the Total Group was 6.85 compared to 7.00 in 2010.

Students first needed to formulate a thesis in order to best respond to the prompt. They then needed to refer to and integrate both sources in order to develop relevant and thorough responses. The content of the two sources provided information related to a general topic, health and well-being, in fairly clear formats that allowed most students to accomplish the task. Many students were able to understand the audio source well, which allowed them to compare the two sources.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As in the past, many students tended to summarize the information presented rather than comparing and contrasting. Some students read directly from the printed source; others had labored or halting expression or poor pronunciation. In some cases, lack of control of language undermined the ability to develop the topic and complete the task.

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?

- Simulation of the testing environment during the course of the year will familiarize students with the format of the exam. Past practice has indicated that simulation helps students achieve higher scores. 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 without direct quotations.
- Reemphasize reading for meaning, and work with students on their ability to speak in their own words.
- Practice presentational speaking so that students are aware of the proper register required of a more formal presentation.
- Define social and cultural references so that students will be aware of both in the sources provided in the question.
- 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.