



## Student Performance Q&A: 2013 AP® Italian Language Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2013 free-response questions for AP® Italian Language and Culture were written by the Chief Reader, Beppe Cavatorta of the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona. 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?***

This task assessed writing in the interpersonal communicative mode by having students reply to an e-mail message. Students were allotted 15 minutes to read the message and write the reply. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the e-mail and then to write a reply using a formal form of address. The reply had to address all the questions and requests raised in the message, as well as ask for more details about something mentioned in the message.

The course theme for the E-Mail Reply task was *Bellezza ed estetica*, and it required students to use the formal register to respond to two questions from an employee of the Vatican Museums about their school club's future visit. Students answered two questions: (1) Why did your club decide to visit the Vatican Museums? and (2) When and how long do you plan to be at the Museums? Finally, the students had to ask for details about some information contained in the original email.

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

The mean score for the Standard Group<sup>1</sup> was 3.56 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.67. Students performed best on this task out 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.

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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.

- 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.
- 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 of use of 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.
- Often students used inappropriate register, mostly in the email's body and in the closing.
- There was a noticeable lack of idiomatic language though it did not detract from responses that were fully understandable and contained frequent elaboration. Sometimes idiomatic language was used, even though it was not appropriate for formal correspondence.
- Though not in the scoring guidelines specifically, many Readers noted a fairly frequent occurrence of second language interference.
- The vast majority of respondents put their first and last names in their closing.

***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 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<sup>®</sup> 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, to a pen-pal; introduce yourself; ask questions, etc.), to arrive gradually, year after year, to the level of complexity of the AP<sup>®</sup> task.

## **Question 2**

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

This task assessed writing in the presentational communicative mode by having students write a persuasive essay on a given topic while referencing three sources of information about the topic. Students were first allotted 6 minutes to read the essay topic and the two printed sources. Then they listened to the one audio source. Afterward, they had 40 minutes to write the essay. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. Students needed to be able first to comprehend the three sources and then to present their different viewpoints. They also had to present their own viewpoint and defend it thoroughly, using information from all the sources to support the essay.

As they referred to the sources, they needed to identify them appropriately. Furthermore, the essay had to be organized into clear paragraphs.

The course theme for the Persuasive Essay task was *Sfide globali*, and the task concerned the waste of water and other natural resources. It presented a written text about the vast amount of water necessary to produce various foods. It contained a graph with data about both the amount of water necessary to produce various goods and the daily per capita use of water in Italy as compared to underdeveloped countries. Finally, an audio text presented some solutions aimed at reducing waste and pollution caused by the preference in Italy for bottled mineral water.

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

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.95 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.16. Student performance on this task was not as good as on the E-mail Reply.

### ***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:

- Some students did not provide effective treatment within the context of the task, for example, not addressing all three sources while offering their own perspective.
- Some students did not address the prompt directly and completely, including its various components.
- Some students did not demonstrate an understanding of the distinct points of view and the information contained in each of the sources, with specific references to each one.
- Some students did not integrate content from all three sources to support a thesis. They often cited or identified only one or two sources, with few specific details.
- Some students did not clearly and coherently present their own viewpoint together with a persuasive argument and substantive examples.
- Essays were disorganized and lacked transitional elements and cohesive devices, such as the use of expressions to connect ideas and maintain a plausible line of reasoning.
- Some essays showed a lack of comprehensibility and a lack of clarity of expression.
- There was a lack of varied and rich vocabulary and idiomatic language; instead, students engaged in the repetitive use of elementary vocabulary and no idioms.
- 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 students did not develop their paragraphs using both simple and compound sentences.
- Some students did not use appropriate register.
- Some students did not cite sources or elaborate on the pertinence of the evidence being marshaled in support of an argument.

### ***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 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) together with their 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® 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 and follow the instructions for this task and to read the question very carefully before beginning to write the essay. Students should also spend some time outlining their essay prior to writing it.

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

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 exam. Teachers should discuss the sample essays with students so that they have a clear idea of how scoring guidelines are applied.

Students need periodic in-class, timed practice in writing a persuasive essay that reflects the actual exam conditions. Students need to develop a sense of how much time it will take to write such an essay. 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, use of subjunctive, placement of accents, spelling, use of transitional elements, staying on task, and use of paragraphs.

Finally, it is important for Italian teachers to participate in Workshops and Summer Institutes to glean information and then disseminate it to their students. It is imperative that students are aware of the task 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 *Scienza e tecnologia*. For this task, students needed to respond to five audio prompts spoken by the student's friend Anna.

1. Anna calls her friend and states her need to go to the dentist. She is clearly unhappy and wants to know how her friend feels when her friend is in a similar situation. Students had to respond and comment.
2. Anna is worried because this is her first time seeing this dentist and asks her friend if he/she could go with her. Students had to answer and to agree to accompany her.
3. Anna mentions the time she needs to be at the dentist's and where his office is located, then asks how she and her friend should get downtown. Students had to respond to her question.
4. Anna agrees and then asks her friend if they should go to the theater or go shopping after her appointment. Students had to agree and express a preference.
5. Anna agrees, states that she is still nervous, and says good-bye. Students had to reassure her and say good-bye.

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

The mean score for the Standard Group was 2.93 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 3.21. The Standard Group did nearly as well on this task as on the Persuasive Essay, while the Total Group did slightly better on this task than on the Persuasive Essay.

### ***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 students did not provide an exchange appropriate to the task.
- Some students did not provide appropriate information, such as offering a viable suggestion for getting to the stadium.
- There was a lack of comprehensibility and clarity of expression.
- Some students used 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), lack of subordinate clauses, incorrect usage, and errors in word order.
- Some students often did not use appropriate register.

### ***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 following suggestions would be useful for teachers to implement 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, etc.).
- Students should read and listen very carefully the instructions on how to respond to the task.
- 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 clips from various media would be useful in and out of the classroom. Many of these materials are easily accessible on the Internet, and AP<sup>®</sup> Central has a list of links to 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 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.
- Since 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 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 in between individual questions.

## Question 4

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

This task assessed speaking in the presentational communicative mode by having students make a comparative oral presentation on a cultural topic. Students were allotted 4 minutes to read the topic and prepare the presentation and then 2 minutes to deliver the presentation. The response received a single holistic score based on how well it accomplished the assigned task. The presentation needed to compare the student's own community to an area of the Italian-speaking world, demonstrating understanding of cultural features of the Italian-speaking world. Furthermore, the presentation had to be organized clearly.

The course theme for the Cultural Comparison task was *Famiglia e società*. The task consisted of a question asking the student to discuss the role of elderly people 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 1.63 out of a possible 5 points. The mean score for the Total Group was 1.94. Both Standard Group and Total Group performance on this task was statistically the lowest of all four free-response tasks.

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

Common errors or omissions included the following:

- Some students did not provide an effective treatment of the topic within the context of the task.
- Some students did not provide a clear comparison of their community with that of the target culture and did not offer supporting details and pertinent examples.
- Some students did not demonstrate a complete understanding of the Italian context to which they were comparing their own culture.
- Some students did not provide an organized presentation with a clear and orderly comparison of the two communities.
- Some students were not able to verbalize a comprehensible response with ease and clarity of expression, instead providing a series of disjointed words, phrases, or expressions that lacked cohesion and clarity.
- Some students did not provide an accurate response containing variety in grammar, syntax, and usage; frequent grammatical and syntactic errors made comprehension difficult.
- Students did not consistently employ the appropriate formal register.

- Some students' lack of correct pronunciation, intonation, and pacing impeded comprehension.
- Some students did not engage in successful self-correction or did not clarify their response to enhance comprehension. For example, when attempting to self-correct, they merely repeated an incorrect word or phrase.

***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 with their community and one in the target culture and include accurate and appropriate examples. Likewise, linguistic aspects are important (pronunciation, intonation, pacing, register, grammar, syntax, usage, lexicon, and idiomatic expressions).

Teachers should be attentive to the following points:

- Instruct students to read and follow the instructions very carefully.
- Provide models of comparisons of home community with that of 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 questions in the exam, the most important suggestion for improvement in their students' performance is to offer constant practice during AP<sup>®</sup> courses by providing examples from previous exams. The AP<sup>®</sup> should be a final step of a well-built curriculum, the integration of the interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive mode within a cultural context. These are all necessary skills that should be gradually developed in a well-articulated curriculum and the AP<sup>®</sup> course and exam being the culmination of the study of a language.