

FIRST LANGUAGE JAPANESE

Paper 0507/02

Reading and Directed Writing

General comments

The performance of candidates was comparable to that of last year.

Most candidates completed the paper in time. Some even appeared to have left enough time to improve on the style and/or content of their work. Furthermore, some candidates worked out an overall structure or wrote a couple of major points to be included in their response. Evidence of good time-management and pre-writing planning are commonly found in the work of strong candidates.

Candidates responded to the questions in **Part 1** very positively and assertively in the sense that they showed clear agreement or disagreement with the arguments in the two passages, explaining the reason for their stance and suggesting ideas to overcome the political, social and educational challenges discussed by the authors. As a result, a great number of candidates scored high marks in **Part 1**.

Part 2 is designed to test candidates' linguistic knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, syntactic and discourse structures and socio-cultural appropriateness (e.g. politeness indicated by grammar and vocabulary). Just as in previous years, candidates who scored high marks in **Part 2** tended to write fluently and with greater accuracy. These candidates generally scored higher marks in **Part 1**, too. However, there were a few cases where linguistically weaker candidates managed to write very readable answers in **Part 1**. Those candidates showed strength in expressing ideas clearly by means of simple vocabulary and basic, but accurate grammar. While it is indeed possible to communicate effectively using a simpler vocabulary and solid grammar, communication can break down when a great variety of words is used in inaccurate ways. Therefore, instructors are encouraged to consolidate their learners' basic linguistic accuracy, while also working on their paraphrasing skills. By encouraging the development of good paraphrasing skills candidates will acquire a wider range of vocabulary. A keen sense of the appropriateness of language in context will be enhanced, as a result.

Comments on specific questions

Candidates' reading comprehension and writing skills were tested in two questions.

Question 1 tests skills in selecting, comparing and summarising specific information from the two passages (A and B). Further marks are given to candidates whose writing shows a higher level of proficiency and originality. Candidates are asked to write a short composition (circa 400 words) on a topic common to both passages. While relevance is one of the key elements, the composition cannot be a mere summary. The material must be developed in a clear, logical and coherent discussion. Given the stipulated word length, unnecessary repetition and circumlocution should be avoided.

A format typically used by competent candidates is as follows:

1. First, state very briefly (in one or two sentences) what the topic shared by passages A and B is. Alternatively, give a brief opinion on the topic common to both passages (e.g. the stories relating to this topic are surprising, moving, familiar etc.). This constitutes a very short introduction.
2. Secondly, refer to the most important points in texts A and B. For example, give a brief account of the main differences in opinion on the topic between texts A and B.
3. Thirdly, explain how the facts and experiences described in the passages are similar or dissimilar to your own viewpoint/experience.
4. Lastly, write a short conclusion. This can be, for example, a short summary of the main points discussed, followed by suggestions and/or predictions for the future.

Of course, the above format is not the only possible format for tackling a question of the type discussed above, but the structure of composition should be clear and well thought-out at all times. Therefore, as discussed earlier, good pre-writing planning is essential.

Stronger candidates wrote a summary of circa 300-350 words (including a brief introduction), comparing thoughts and opinions expressed by the two authors, followed by a personal opinion, suggestion, etc. in 50-100 words. The best candidates showed evidence of an excellent grasp of the issues raised in the two texts, and gave a succinct summary of the two passages, comparing their main points. Arguments arose naturally from the two passages, and a clear case was made for the candidate's point of view using excellent grammar and a wide vocabulary. In contrast, weaker to middling candidates developed material in a less fluent way and used fewer types of sentence structure and a less varied vocabulary. Nevertheless, some of them still managed to communicate their main ideas sufficiently, making the most of simple but accurate language. Even some of the weaker essays were characterised by good paragraphing and accurate basic grammar and conjunctive expressions.

Question 2 invites responses to the passages in a variety of forms (e.g. a selective summary, a letter, a report, a speech, a script of a conversation or broadcast, a continuation of a story, etc.). This question tests the ability to write creatively and communicatively in a given genre. Needless to say, the composition must be relevant to the topic. It should be logically consistent, coherent and succinct. At the same time, the specific register (style and level of language) and format that are accepted for the genre should be followed. As in **Question 1**, accurate and appropriate use of *Kanji*, *katakana*, *hiragana*, punctuation and *Genkō-Yōshi* are also tested.

This year, candidates were asked to write a brief article of about 300 words for a column in the newspaper that had (for the sake of argument) published passages A and B. Opinions should be illustrated by examples to support the overall argument. Candidates generally responded to the question with a sense of enthusiasm, expressing their opinions in a straightforward, sincere, and convincing manner. For example, candidates chose to back either the stance taken in article A or B and explained why, giving candid opinions that were supported by their personal experiences. The topic this year was the exposure to English and Japanese at an early stage of a child's education and its consequences. This topic is perhaps something close to candidates' hearts, which may explain the general enthusiasm conveyed in their writings.

FIRST LANGUAGE JAPANESE

Paper 0507/03
Continuous Writing

General comments

The level of performance by the candidates this session is comparable to last year. Notably, successful candidates chose a topic which played to their linguistic strengths and individual interests, which helped them to produce interesting compositions in a style appropriate to the chosen subject. This approach to writing gave a clear indication that these candidates had been well prepared, and for this the teachers and Centres are to be congratulated.

Concerning linguistic competence, the gap between stronger and weaker candidates is still quite wide, judging by the contrasting levels of linguistic variation and depth. Yet, regardless of such differences, a great number of candidates managed to produce reasonable and, in some cases, entertaining or even thought-provoking essays. Stronger candidates typically employed a wide range of vocabulary and complex sentence structures, and wrote coherently using a clear three-part (Introduction-Content-Conclusion) frame of discourse structure. Further, some stronger candidates even used a traditional Japanese discourse-structure to maintain coherence in an authentic manner. This discourse structure consists of 4 parts: KI (Introduction of a topic), SHÔ (Development on the topic), TEN (Surprise Turn – a literary device unique to Japanese composition), and KETSU (Conclusion).

Compared to last year, improvements have been observed in the following areas: relevance of contents to the chosen topic, clarity of argumentation, coherence, grammatical accuracy and paragraph linking. Although only among stronger candidates, progress has also been made in areas of originality, *Kanji*, adequacy and appropriateness of lexical choices.

Expressions of hatred and violence in candidates' writing have increasingly diminished in the last two years after previous reports alerted Centres to this problem. Writing of this aggressive kind is often accompanied by small drawings in typical *manga* style in the margins of answer sheets or exam papers. The negative influence of *manga*/computer games occurs more often in the work of weaker candidates. Textual incoherence, stylistic inconsistency and a limited vocabulary are often the result. While the use of *manga* or popular magazine articles may appeal to learners, their content and register are not necessarily adequate for candidates at this level. Instructors are strongly encouraged to incorporate more advanced reading matter as part of the educational material used to prepare the candidates for the exam. Nevertheless, it was clear that more and more candidates have been exposed to texts at an advanced level which has had a positive on the overall quality of the work this year.

Comments on specific questions

Nine titles were given, calling for essays in an appropriate style: imaginative, descriptive or argumentative.

The marking criteria are as follows.

1. Material (interest, relevance, exemplification, explanation, detail, and maturity);
2. Structure (paragraphing, paragraph links, balance and cohesiveness in the overall structure, sentence sequence, structural effects, and clear beginning and end of the discourse);
3. Style (word range, sentence structure, sense of audience, variation in choice of vocabulary and structure, and stylistic effects); and
4. Accuracy (grammar, punctuation, dialogue, word usage, spelling including *Kanji* use, and usage of *Genkô Yôshi*).

Linguistic accuracy, clarity of argument and originality of content are essential for good writing. Further, an appropriate style and discourse structure must be chosen according to the genre in which the candidate is

writing, and should be consistent throughout. For example, a narrative requires an original and appealing storyline and an effective story-telling method, while, say, a socio-cultural essay requires clear and logical argumentation, convincing reasoning, and adequate examples to support arguments.

This year's topics were as follows:

1. "We'll make a fresh start here today" said my father. Then he took a deep breath. Looking at his profile, somehow, I felt reassured..." Complete this story.
2. The number of people getting married has been steadily decreasing in recent years. State your opinion on this issue, giving reasons and/or facts to support your argument.
3. What does the expression "sustainable development" mean to you? Explain your ideas and supply concrete examples for clarification.
4. Explain the term "absenteeism/truancy" succinctly. Consider the cause(s) of such phenomena and suggest possible solutions.
5. What can be done to prevent underage smoking? State your opinion suggesting solutions with concrete examples.
6. Write a composition using the expression "*keiro-no-hi* (Respect-for-the-Aged Day)".
7. Write a free composition on what thoughts the idiom "*Ikki-Ichiyu* (waver between hope and despair)" evokes in you.
8. State whether you agree or disagree with the statement, "computer games are not good for one's health", and give reasons why. Supply specific examples to support your argument and discuss logically.
9. Write a composition based on your impression of the picture below.

Topic 1 is in the genre of narrative writing and thus, coherence, creativity, and effective story-telling are essential. The story must follow naturally from the lead-in section given in the question itself, maintaining the same style and register. Topic 9 is also a creative writing task, but it uses a visual stimulus (a photo). Candidates are expected to describe vividly what they see in the picture and develop their material by supplying an original story or by discussing issues expressed in the photo. For topics 2, 4, 5 and 8 candidates are expected to establish their standpoint first, and then to develop analytical and logical arguments in a consistent manner. This requires an appropriate, three-part discourse structure which consists of an introduction, discussion and conclusion. Topic 3 is a free composition on a given topic in which candidates are tested on their creativity and effective use of language to express personal opinions. For topics 6 and 7 a clear and succinct explanation of an idiom/proverb is required. For example, fixed expressions may be paraphrased in more ordinary language, and the meaning of a proverb may be illustrated with reference to a situation from everyday life. This should be followed by a discussion of the idiom/proverb in a coherent manner.

Needless to say, the content of an essay should be relevant to the chosen topic in all cases. Candidates are strongly advised to plan the content and structure of their composition before they start writing.