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FIRST LANGUAGE JAPANESE

Paper 0507/02

Reading and Directed Writing

General comments

There was a strong indication that candidates were well prepared and given enough opportunity to practise their writing skills using good materials. Candidates displayed the ability to plan what they were to write and appeared to organise their arguments in a coherent manner. They were able to express ideas and feelings accurately, fluently and effectively.

Differences between strong and weak candidates were observed both in **Part 1** and **Part 2**. Generally speaking, candidates who showed strength in linguistic knowledge which was tested in **Part 2** also demonstrated competent writing skills in **Part 1**. However, some who have higher linguistic competence did not adequately express original ideas in a coherent, consistent and logical manner. Suggestions of suitable practise exercises are discussed below (see **Exercises to enhance communicative skills**).

Very good candidates produced a coherent and fluent composition that is also stylistically consistent and original. Evidence of good planning was observed. Their superior language skills appear to be the result of solid, constant learning with the help of effective teaching by their teachers. These candidates' use of precise expressions and extensive vocabulary showed that they were exposed to a variety of reading materials and appropriate writing exercises. Their originality and maturity in the contents showed a careful guidance by the teachers to bring out the best in each candidate.

The majority of candidates attempted to answer all questions by distributing time to each of the questions efficiently. They reacted positively to the given topics (**Part 1**: *Yutori* education and study abroad or study in Japan. **Part 2**: Japanese education system). Stronger candidates discussed the topics from objective and subjective perspectives in a well-structured format, and weaker candidates tended to draw an opinion from the reading passages which they then summarised.

Weaker candidates were largely divided into two groups. The first group appeared to be fluent in spoken Japanese. They wrote quite fluently in a colloquial style, using a series of short sentences, or a non-standard sentence structure, but they were unable to tie their expressions together to form a coherent argument. The second group of weaker candidates seemed to possess a higher knowledge of language: they wrote accurately using appropriate expressions. However, their compositions did not communicate a clear message. Instead, their compositions read like a patchwork of vague ideas. There was not enough evidence of complex thought behind the writing. Typically, these candidates copied ideas from the reading passages A and B without fully digesting them and repeated them several times without relating to their personal experiences or opinions.

Generally, the weaker candidates were not always able to compose a complex sentence that was grammatically correct. They tended to begin a sentence with one vague idea, which they could not hold until the end of the sentence. General inconsistency of the sentence structure, style and of their arguments was observed. Judging from their style and the range of vocabulary, these candidates seemed to have been highly exposed to popular *Manga* (Japanese comic) culture of horror, occult and fantasy genres. Some candidates drew such *Mangas* on the question papers with great attention to detail. Their artistic talents were acknowledged, albeit inappropriate. Teachers need to encourage candidates to articulate these messages – that are contained in the drawings – in their own words. Teachers could ask candidates to write their ideas down and then revise it together until they become satisfied with what they have expressed. This is a painstaking process of course, but the result will be rewarding.

Comments on specific questions**Part 1**

Question 1 tests the candidates' ability to select, compare and summarise specific information from the two reading passages (A and B) and, in response, to express their opinions, thoughts, and ideas. The two passages share a topic where the candidates must write a relevant short composition. While relevance is one of the key elements, the composition cannot be a mere abridged copy of the reading passages: the candidates' original response to the given topic must be clearly, logically and coherently expressed. The required length is about 400 words, which is relatively short, so unnecessary repetitions and circumlocution should be avoided. Good planning prior to the writing is crucial. Also, orthographic conventions need to be followed sufficiently.

A few candidates produced a well-planned, well-balanced composition using a good format. See the following example:

- First, state very briefly (no more than a sentence or two) what the shared topic (in passages A and B) is. Alternatively, give a very brief statement about one's reaction to the reading passages (e.g. the stories are surprising, moving, familiar, etc.). This constitutes a very short introduction.
- Secondly, refer to the contents of A and B. For example, give a brief summary and/or a brief account of the theme in common and differences of opinions or perspectives expressed in A and B.
- State one's own impression of the two passages, and explain how the facts and experiences described in the passages are similar/dissimilar to his/her own viewpoints/experiences. Expound on the argument further by stating one's thoughts and/or analysing the reasons for the situations that are described in A and B.
- Give a short concluding remark. For example, this can be a short summary of main points followed by suggestions, and/or predictions for future situations.

Of course there are other possible formats. Whatever the format used the structure of the composition must be clear and well thought-out. For this, planning is crucial and teachers are strongly recommended to emphasise this in classrooms.

Question 2 invites a response 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, or expressive development of an idea in the passage, etc.) This question tests the candidates' ability to write more creatively and communicatively using high-level linguistic skills. Needless to say, the composition must be relevant to the topic, logically consistent, coherent and succinct. It is also expected to follow a style accepted for the genre. Like in **Question 1**, accurate and appropriate use of Kanji, katakana, hiragana, punctuation and Genkōyōshi are also tested.

In **Question 2** this year, the candidates were asked to write a brief note for a speech entitled "Education in Japan". Candidates must write their opinions, thoughts, ideas, etc., based on their own experience and future prospects. They must also give a specific suggestion to make the speech convincing.

A few candidates were able to satisfy all the above requirements.

However, many candidates struggled to express their ideas clearly and succinctly. Weaker candidates tended to lose the thread of their argument in the middle of their writing. Some stronger candidates stated their opinion briefly, at the beginning that encompassed the argument which was to follow. They succeeded in discussing one clear idea, providing appropriate examples to support the claim and gave a specific suggestion to conclude the piece. Their content was mature and well thought out.

Writing a shorter composition can be more challenging than an extended one because it has to be succinct. Good planning is essential. The following types of exercises may help:

- give students pieces of reading passages and ask them to give it a title
- give students a title and instruct them to write on that title.

Part 2 consists of four subsections. The questions test:

- logical, semantic and grammatical knowledge (**Questions 3-7**)
- lexical and semantic knowledge (**Questions 8-12**)
- synonyms and Kanji (**Questions 13-17**)
- grammatical knowledge and relevant meta-language (**Questions 18-22**).

Questions 3-17 test the candidates' linguistic knowledge, which forms the basis of good writing. Questions in **Part 2** test the candidates' linguistic flexibility. Stronger candidates are able to express their ideas in various ways by rephrasing and paraphrasing, using appropriate words, grammar, expressions, etc.

For candidates and teachers preparing for next year's exam, the following advice may help.

Exercises to enhance linguistic skills

To enhance the candidates' linguistic knowledge, a traditional method such as the gap-filling exercise (as in **Part 2, Questions 3-12**) proves highly effective. To make the exercises more communicative, teachers may wish to take an appropriate passage from any 'real' material – e.g. a novel, newspaper, Internet page, manuals, etc. – and white out linguistic items for the candidates to fill in. Such linguistic items can be in conjugational form, particles, confusing expressions, linking expressions, referential expressions, etc. If the passage gives enough context it is more realistic, easier and more meaningful to the candidates.

Exercises to enhance communicative skills

To enhance the candidates' communicative skills, interactive exercises such as information-gathering games are useful. Also, exercises that involve 'paraphrasing' and 'rewriting for a particular purpose' are effective. For example, prepare three different reading passages of the same topic. Divide the class into three groups, then give a reading passage to each of the three groups. Ask each group to underline ten words and find at least two or three paraphrases for each of the ten words. Draw a scoreboard with the three team-names on the black/whiteboard. When the candidates are ready, ask them to decide which group goes first. A representative from one of the three groups reads the short passage using the paraphrases that have been prepared. At each underlined section, they say 'paraphrase!' and the candidates in the other two groups try to guess the original word/expression. Each time someone gives the correct answer, his/her group scores. The teacher plays the umpire and keeps scores.

Another exercise involves learning to write according to a specific genre. Divide the class into three to five groups. Each group chooses an occupation – such as a journalist, scientist, novelist, copywriter, teacher, etc. – and they must keep that a secret. Give a short passage to each group. Ask them to change the style of writing so that it matches their occupation. When they are ready ask them to read it aloud in class. Other groups guess their occupation. Prior to this exercise, the teacher may explain to the candidates about different genres, purposes and styles of writing. Alternatively, such information may be elicited from the candidate and discussed in class.

A truly communicative piece of writing consists of solid linguistic skills, good planning, a good sense of the implied audience (i.e. writing with attention to coherence, relevance, logical consistency, clarity, style, etc.), and the writer's creative personality (i.e. having something interesting to say in a convincing manner).

Exercise to enhance originality and maturity

Exposure to good reading materials is essential. Originality and maturity in writing can be enhanced by exposure to a good selection of varied reading materials and relevant exercises that involves persuasion, debate and discussion. It is important that candidates cultivate a 'sense of audience' as it leads to improved coherence, style, originality and maturity of ideas underlining the writing.

Although comics can supplement, they cannot be a part of the central reading material. Visual materials are powerful tools of expression, but they can severely deprive candidates of the opportunity to recreating vivid senses by using linguistic means. Languages in comics mimic the spoken language and thus, complex sentences are rarely used and complex ideas are visually, not linguistically, depicted.

Generally, articles from newspapers and journals make good topical reading materials, but also candidates are encouraged to read more varied literature with good relevant content that is of the appropriate linguistic level. For information, teachers may wish to consult the website of the SLA: Japan School Library Association (<http://www.j-sla.or.jp/katsudo/tosho1.html>), for example. Various types of literature are recommended.

Paper 0507/03
Continuous Writing

General comments

The majority of candidates were able to write coherently with varying degrees of linguistic fluency. Many candidates wrote using a good format of discourse structure and as a result produced natural, convincing and interesting compositions. Some were even able to use a structural format that is characteristic to Japanese composition, i.e. Ki, Shou, Ten and Ketsu. These candidates scored particularly well. In general, candidates with weaker linguistic and writing skills tended to choose imaginative or descriptive topics, while stronger candidates chose topics that required thorough planning and logical structure in writing. The former type of candidates tended to write in a colloquial style. Their linguistic performance was limited, but showed some fluency in a style that is common in a popular youth culture, which matched the chosen topics. Therefore, this was credited. In other words, partially thanks to the choice of the topic, these candidates tended to do better in Paper 3 (which tests less structured writing skills) than in Paper 2 (which requires more directed writing). Candidates who chose a more logical writing style and who received higher marks in Paper 3 tended also to do well in Paper 2. They clearly demonstrated flexibility in linguistic usage and showed maturity in content.

Comments on specific questions

A selection of nine titles were given and called for the candidates' imaginative, narrative or argumentative response in an appropriate style.

Marking criteria is as follows.

- Material (Interest, Appropriate, Exemplification, Explanation, Detail, and Maturity).
- Structure (Paragraphing, Paragraph Links, Balance and cohesiveness in the overall structure, Sentence sequence, Structural effects, and Clear beginning and end of the discourse).
- Style (Word range, Sentence structure, Sense of audience, Varied style in the choice of vocabulary and structure, and Stylistic effects).
- Accuracy (Grammar, Punctuation, Dialogue, Word usage, Spelling including Kanji use, and Usage of GenkōYōshi).

Candidates are expected to write not only with linguistic accuracy, but also with clarity of argument and originality in the content. Also, an appropriate style and discourse structure must be chosen according to the genre to which s/he is writing and it should be consistent throughout. For example, an imaginative topic requires originality and appealing story-telling methods, while a socio-cultural or a socio-scientific essay requires analytical and logical arguments and convincing reasoning.

Topic 1 is in the genre of fantasy writing, and thus, creativity and originality as well as coherent and appealing story-telling skills are necessary. *Topic 9* is also a creative writing piece, but it uses a visual stimulus (a photo), and thus, the candidates' are expected to describe vividly what they see in the picture using appropriate expressions. *Topics 2, 4, 5 and 8* require candidates to indicate their standpoint first, then to develop analytical and logical arguments consistently. This requires an appropriate discourse structure consisting of an Introduction, Contents and Conclusion. *Topic 3* is a free-essay in which candidates are tested for their creativity and richer linguistic skills in expressing a semi-fantasy world effectively. *Topics 6 and 7* require candidates to give a clear and succinct explanation of the idiom and/or proverb – i.e. paraphrase the fixed expressions in more ordinary language. Candidates are then expected to give an original discussion in a coherent manner.

Across these topics, the writing contents should be relevant to the chosen topic, and needless to say, a clear structure is required. Candidates are encouraged to plan the contents carefully prior to the actual writing.