

FIRST LANGUAGE JAPANESE

Paper 0507/02
Reading and Directed Writing

General comments

Candidates' performance improved significantly compared to last year. The reading passages and questions were of the same level of difficulty as previous years.

The majority of candidates completed all sections in the allotted time, which seems to have been the result of good essay planning and time management. Candidates showed a marked improvement in their understanding of the material on the question paper and gave original and relevant responses with a high degree of linguistic accuracy. Teachers and candidates are to be congratulated.

Most candidates did well in **Part 1** which is designed to test candidates' skills in reading comprehension and directed writing. **Part 2** is designed to test candidates' linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary, and language structure. Candidates who score high marks in **Part 2** tend to write fluently, and thus they also achieve high marks in **Part 1**. This year was no exception to that tendency. However, some candidates, whose linguistic skills were mediocre, wrote very readable essays in **Part 1** because they succeeded in maximizing basic skills in a well-structured way.

Comments on specific questions

Part 1

Candidates' reading comprehension and writing skills are tested across two questions.

Question 1 tests the ability to select, compare and summarise specific information from the two passages, **[A]** and **[B]**. Further marks may be given to candidates whose writing shows high language proficiency and originality. Candidates are expected to write a short composition (circa 400 words) on a topic that is common to the two passages. While relevance is one of the key elements, the composition cannot be a mere summary – the material must be developed and expanded through clear, logical and coherent discussion. Given the word length, unnecessary repetition and circumlocution are best avoided.

A format typically used by competent candidates is as follows:

- Firstly, state very briefly what the shared topic is (in passages **[A]** and **[B]**). Alternatively, give a brief opinion of 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 account of the common theme and list differences of opinions.
- Thirdly, explain how the facts and experiences described in the passages are similar or dissimilar to one's own viewpoint/experience.
- Next, develop the argument further by analysing one's personal viewpoint/experience, etc. then compare that to the situations/viewpoints that are described in **[A]** and **[B]**.
- Lastly, give a short conclusion. This can be for example a short summary of the main points followed by suggestions, and/or predictions for future situations.

Other formats can be used, of course, but the structure of the composition should be clear and well thought-out. Therefore, good essay planning is essential which can be evidenced by good paragraphing and use of appropriate conjunctive expressions. Spelling and formatting must be carefully checked.

The majority of candidates wrote a good summary of the two passages in circa 300-350 words (including a brief introduction) and gave a personal opinion, suggestion, etc. in 50-100 words. A few candidates showed evidence of a good grasp of the issues by giving a succinct summary of the two passages and by comparing their main points. Candidates' arguments followed naturally from the passages, and a clear case was made for their chosen line of discussion using excellent grammar and a wide range of vocabulary. In contrast, weaker candidates developed the material in a somewhat wooden way and used less varied sentence structures and vocabulary. Nevertheless, they managed to communicate messages sufficiently well making the most of simple but accurate language use. These weaker, but successful candidates typically employed good paragraphing and accurate conjunctive expressions.

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, 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 logical, consistent, coherent and succinct and should be in a style appropriate to the specified genre. As in **Question 1**, accurate and appropriate use of *Kanji*, *katakana*, *hiragana*, punctuation and *Genkô Yôshi* are also assessed.

This year, candidates were asked to write a brief article (in circa 300 words) for the readers' contribution column of the newspaper that had (supposedly) published the passages **[A]** and **[B]**. Opinions needed to be stated clearly giving real-life examples to support arguments. This year's candidates generally responded to this question with enthusiasm, expressing their opinions in a straightforward manner. For example, many candidates agreed with the author of passage **[A]** and expressed strong doubts about the materialistic cultures which they are used to, whilst others agreed with the author of passage **[B]** suggesting a better way to pursue "the sense of fulfilment and happiness" in materials that are not necessarily costly or damaging to the environment. Personal experiences were amply supplied in various degrees of fluency.

FIRST LANGUAGE JAPANESE

Paper 0507/03
Continuous Writing

General comments

Candidates performed competently and the standard was higher than last year. The majority chose a subject that suited their linguistic ability, and they wrote in a style which was appropriate to their chosen subject.

Levels of language competence varied greatly from one candidate to another, but on the whole they managed to maximize their performance by choosing a subject and stylistic approach that matched their linguistic abilities. Stronger candidates tended to choose a topic that called for an analytical and argumentative approach. Typically they employed a wide range of vocabulary and complex sentence structures. They employed a three- (or four-) part discourse structure that consisted of KI (Introduction), SHÔ (Content), TEN (Turn – a literary device unique to Japanese composition, which derived from Japanese translation of ancient Chinese poetry), and KETSU (Conclusion).

Significant improvements were seen in the following areas: relevance of content to the chosen topic, clarity of arguments, coherence, grammatical accuracy, and paragraph links. To a lesser degree improvements were also observed in the areas of originality, *Kanji*, and appropriateness of lexical choices.

Candidates appeared to have enjoyed writing on their chosen topic as evidenced in their own expressions. The following are examples: “the word [family ties] reminds me of a memorable incident that happened years ago...” (in response to **Question 3**); “[Doing my best]” is my motto in all circumstances, because...” (in response to **Question 6**); and “The problem of, and possible solutions to the drug-culture are extremely relevant to us” (in response to **Question 4**). Most candidates gave a clear opinion in their own words, although in the case of weaker candidates there were some grammatical errors or idiosyncratic use of vocabulary. Unlike last year where a general tone of negativity, pessimism and indifference dominated the writings of weaker candidates, this year’s candidates generally used a range of positive vocabulary.

Some weaker candidates showed signs of influence from popular *manga* and gaming culture where their vocabulary fluctuated between colloquial to extremely archaic and sentences were short and haphazardly put together. While use of *manga* or popular magazine articles may interest learners, their content and register are not necessarily appropriate for candidates at this level. Judging from high-scoring compositions, stronger candidates appear to have had exposure to a selection of reading material, which can be found in classical and contemporary literature and educational magazines.

Comments on specific questions

Nine titles were given which called for imaginative, narrative or argumentative responses in an appropriate style.

Marking criteria are as follows.

- Material (interest, relevance, 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 composition);
- Style (word range, sentence structure, sense of audience, varied style in the choice of vocabulary and structure, and stylistic effects); and
- Accuracy (grammar, punctuation, dialogue, word usage, spelling including *Kanji* use, and use of *GenkôYôshi*).

Linguistic accuracy, clarity of argument and originality of the content are essential. Further, an appropriate style and discourse structure must be chosen according to the genre in which the candidate is writing, and it should be consistent throughout. For example, creative writing requires original content and effective story-telling methods, while a socio-cultural or a socio-scientific essay requires analytical and logical arguments and convincing reasoning.

The nine titles were as follows:

- 1 "...I will get you something nice from here. I will be home on New Year's Eve. OK? Bye!" said my sister cheerfully and put the phone down. She is coming home. The whole family will be together to celebrate New Year's Day for the first time in three years". Complete this story.
- 2 Should high-school education be made compulsory? State your opinion clearly and give reasons and/or facts to support your argument. Discuss convincingly.
- 3 What does the expression "family ties" mean to you? Explain your ideas and supply concrete examples for clarification.
- 4 Explain the term "Youth substance (drug) abuse" succinctly. Consider the cause(s) of such phenomena and suggest possible solutions.
- 5 What can be done to promote "healthy diet" among teenagers? State your opinion and give concrete suggestions.
- 6 Write a composition using the expression "*doryoku wo kakasazu*" [putting all one's efforts into something persistently].
- 7 What does the idiom "*Kyozon-Kyoei*" [co-existence and co-prosperity] make you think about? Write freely.
- 8 State whether you agree or disagree with the idea "ubiquitous information society" and give reasons. Supply specific examples to support your argument and discuss logically.
- 9 Write a composition based on your impression of the picture below.

Question 1 required a narrative response and therefore coherence, creativity, and effective story-telling were essential. The story needed to follow naturally from the lead-in section given in the question itself and, preferably, the same type of register used. **Question 9** also required creative writing, but it used a visual stimulus (a photo). In this case candidates were expected to describe what they saw in the picture and, if possible, to develop the material by supplying an original story or by discussing issues taken from the photo. For **Questions 2, 4, 5** and **8** candidates were expected to indicate their standpoint first, and then to develop analytical and logical arguments in a consistent manner. This required an appropriate three-part discourse structure which consists of Introduction, Content and Conclusion. **Question 3** is a free essay in which candidates are tested for their creativity and effective use of language to express a personal opinion and attitude in a real or a semi-real world. For **Questions 6** and **7** a clear and succinct explanation of the idiom/proverb was required. For example, fixed expressions may be paraphrased in more ordinary language or contextualized in a descriptive narrative for clarification. This should be followed by a discussion of the idiom/proverb.

The content of the composition should be relevant to the chosen question in all cases. Needless to say, a clear structure – such as the typical Japanese format consisting of four sections KI, SHŌ, TEN, KETSU – is required. Candidates are encouraged to plan the content and overall structure before they start writing.