

# 2023/2024 J-LEAP REPORT



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Hello! I am Shiori Kobayashi, working as an assistant teacher at Everett Alvarez High School in Salinas, California. I worked as a Japanese teacher in Japan and Singapore before J-LEAP, but this is my first time living in the US and working at a high school. I have been here for about four months now, and everything I have experienced here is very new to me and I am enjoying it a lot. Here I am going to share about my life in California and experience at high school so far.

## **Salinas, California**

Salinas is the agricultural city known as the Salad Bowl of the World. It is in the middle of California, an hour and half drive from San Jose. It is by Monterey Bay and easy to access many beautiful beaches, fun hiking spots, and famous tourist destinations such as Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea, and Big Sur. It is my first time living this close to beaches, I always enjoy sitting and having coffee on the beach on weekends. Also, it is famous as home of Nobel Prize author, John Steinbeck and the location of the largest and most popular rodeo in California. The climate in Salinas is mild and stable throughout the year in general. However, weather is changeable, so basically it is like we have four seasons in a day. When I came to California in the end of July, it was really cold in the morning and night, so I needed a knit sweater to keep me warm. This is different what I thought of California, but I like it so far.



When I was first informed that I would be located to California, I expected popular tourist

destinations such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, big cities with a lot of entertainment. I had never heard of the name Salinas, so I didn't know where it was and what the city was like. After a little research, I found that it is famous for strawberry and lettuce, which was perfect for me since these two are my absolute favorite fruit and vegetable! On my 30-minute drive to school, I can see huge fields of those crops and it reminds me of my hometown, Nagano. This nostalgic feeling makes my heart a little warm every day.

### **Salinas Union High School District and Everett Alvarez High School**

In Salinas, there are five high schools which offer Japanese lessons and nine Japanese language teachers including myself. We have a powerful PLC (Professional Learning Community) with a strong bond and great interaction each other. All five schools are using the same lesson materials which are designed for content-based learning. We meet every two weeks for a two-hour meeting to check-in on pacing, discuss current situations, and plan events. I felt a little overwhelmed to attend the PLC meeting and share my opinion to experienced teachers at the beginning, but now I am getting used to it and feeling more comfortable. Also, there were two J-LEAP assistant teachers in the district before me, so everyone knows quite well about J-LEAP and gives me a warm support.



At Alvarez, there are two Japanese teachers and about 250 students studying Japanese. My lead teacher, Hashiba sensei teaches four Japanese 1 and one Japanese 3/AP, and another teacher Gomez sensei teaches four Japanese 2 and one Japanese 3. Japanese. In my district, students need to learn one world language for at least two years. They can choose between Spanish, French or Japanese.

In this area, large number of populations speak Spanish, and many students identify themselves as Mexican or Mexican American. There are a lot of students taking Japanese because they already speak English and Spanish and would like to add one more language to be a trilingual person. There are also students who like Japanese cultures like manga or anime especially in Japanese 3 or AP, however, most students in Japanese 1 and 2 take Japanese because of two-year language requirement.

Through my four-month experience, I learned that teaching Japanese at high school in the US is not only teaching a language but also fostering students and helping students broaden their

perspectives of the world. Since I used to work as a Japanese teacher before J-LEAP, I was confused to see how the class structure and style differ from each other. Materials are focused on content what students learn, not on vocabulary and grammar. It is totally different what I had experienced as a teacher and a student learning English back in my school days. It didn't appear the students were retaining what they learned, so I was not sure how they can learn Japanese. After being in the classroom here for a while, I got to realize that students are growing every day and learning many things through Japanese language.

At Alvarez, we have many students who have difficulty concentrating on studying especially after pandemic and some sort of issues outside school. I was surprised to notice that some students cannot read an analog clock and need to use their phones to communicate with their family even during lessons. They might not be acquiring Japanese language; however, they are learning more important lessons such as being respectful each other and acting polite to everyone in Japanese classroom. Of course, students are learning Japanese and enjoying it, but I feel there is something more important for them to learn.

### **My role in the classroom**

As I mentioned above, there are materials made and used by our district. It is content-based, and students can learn Japanese through various topics which are connected to themselves. Everything is designed basing on ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language), and it is always clear what students are doing and studying now. My lead teacher, Hashiba sensei is an experienced teacher who has been teaching Japanese at Alvarez for over 12 years. She knows how to make a plan and give a lesson based on the standard. Also, she has deep understandings about students in Salinas, and gives me many comments and advice on a daily basis.

Currently my main roles in front of class are these three; taking attendance, instructing for the activity called "Appetizer", checking-in, and grading. We start every lesson with a warm-up activity called "Appetizer (今日の前菜)" on which students can work individually and have a little review what they learned from a previous class. Students always check-in each other by greeting and asking, "How are you?",



so they can communicate with their classmates from the start of class. For most of classes, I

lead those parts and take attendance by calling their names; therefore, I am making good connections with them, and they perceive me as a teacher, not a visitor. Also, I am trying to help with grading as much as possible including hiragana quiz and unit formative assessment. It is very helpful for me to understand what the expectation is for students.

Another important role I have is walking around the classroom and communicating with students whenever they need it, I realized there are many students who can be easily distracted by their phones or sleep during class. They need a little reminder to focus on the lesson. With their short attention span, they might not be able to fully concentrate on class. However, once they have told what they need to do, most students start focusing on work they need to do. I feel they just need communication with teachers, so it is helpful for them to have two teachers to give them more attention. It helps keep students engaged and can make classes more fruitful.

### **My goal of J-LEAP**

The overall goal is to have different experience of teaching Japanese and learn more about Japanese education. Observing and being a part of Japanese classes at high school in the US gives me a new perspectives of Japanese language education. Also, I would like to take advantage of being here in California. It is one of the states which have good reputation for Japanese education for all levels. I have been attending workshops and gatherings with language teachers in Monterey area and it helps me create new ideas. When I attended ACTFL conference in Chicago, I could have seen many presentations by teachers and professors from California and make connections with them. I would like to visit those teachers in two years and learn more about Japanese education.

I might not choose to be a teacher at high school in the future, but I would like to continue teaching Japanese for the rest of my life. My goal as a J-LEAP AT is to learn new strategies and styles of teaching Japanese, and I would like to apply what I've learned to my teaching after J-LEAP.

I really appreciate the opportunity to be a part of J-LEAP and all the support I've received from everyone in the program. It has been a great experience over the past four months, and I am sure it will continue to be. I would like to do my best in this program and will work hard for students.