



2026 Special Training Program for Japanese-Language Teachers Report



By Henry Aberle

University of Arizona

Tucson, AZ

When I first arrived in Urawa, I didn't know what to expect. What kind of training would this be? How do you train a diverse group of teachers with different teaching backgrounds, experience, and comfort in Japanese? Furthermore, why restrict a training to “non-native” teachers? Would this simply be another example of Japanese people telling foreigners what Japanese culture is, or would we be treated as contributors and experts in our own right?

It was to my pleasant surprise that on Day 1, the staff at the Urawa Language Center admitted that they were equally nervous to face us and had to think long and hard about what would be to our benefit. The approach they landed on was simple and effective—offer programming that enabled an exchange of ideas through hands on activities and discussions with opportunities for JF staff, invited guests, and participants to share their expertise and consider different perspectives. Rather than trying to offer one-size-fits-all solutions, the program encouraged creative thinking and sharing that I believe left everyone feeling acknowledged and respected.

Starting with activities like reverse engineering our teaching philosophies and a slow sensory-engaging small-group walking tour of our local area, the program highlighted pieces of ourselves and our surroundings that in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives go unseen. Conversely, the program took us to hard-to-access places like the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, Washi-no-furusato in Ogawamachi, Nagatoro Brewery, and Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa that expanded our views of Japan.





These activities contributed to three weeks of gentle observation and reflection. In the time outside coordinated group events, I noticed all the ways Tokyo had changed since I last lived there eight years ago. Cash had essentially become optional, the once "underground" streets of Shinjuku Nichome were overflowing with tourists, and while being visibly different was less of a spectacle, some peoples' patience for foreigners was waning. A call

with a customer service agent at JR Central got heated when at one point I was asked to put my Japanese friend on the phone to confirm the orthography of the Language Center's address. In light of this, 「日本語上手」 had a ring of honest surprise and gratitude rather than belittlement that could be met with 「ありがとう」 instead of 「いえいえ」.

These experiences softened me. Since I first lived in Japan, I've spent a lot of time wishing that people would treat me like I was Japanese. What this looked like was me trying to prove to others and myself that I was beyond correction. Every time I couldn't find the right words or my errors were pointed out, I felt angry. Now I see that while those expectations pushed me to be successful, the pain those expectations induced left me isolated.

Walking away from this program, I have a new appreciation for continuous learning and, ultimately, difference. I think people have a misconception of 「改善」 as the pursuit of perfection. Instead, I see it as the possibility of new encounters and growth. I feel incredibly gratitude to this program for helping me heal through encounters with fellow non-native teachers, JF instructors and staff, and people across multiple regions of Japan. In its own way, this program fulfilled its mission to "help the next generation develop a deeper understanding of Japan." Japan and Japanese to me is not one thing or an ideal to be replicated. It is a place and a language with diversity that connects us all. I look forward to sharing this perspective with my students and colleagues and sincerely hope that more people have a chance to experience this Japan Foundation program for themselves.