



2026 Special Training Program for Japanese-Language Teachers Report



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It wasn't hard to spot each other, though we'd never met, as we meandered into breakfast at the LA hotel. We quickly discovered that we were birds of a feather, we American teachers of Japanese, and there was something intangible in the way we moved through and scanned the room that communicated our presence to each other. That, or it was the anime graphic tees that gave it away.

Regardless, by the end of breakfast we had already huddled together in small groups, learning a few names and hometowns. Throughout the rest of the day, we enjoyed further introductions, presentations, and incredible person-centered professional development from Azama-sensei. It was refreshing to find that, even from the pre-flight orientation, the instruction we were receiving was so emotionally intelligent. By the time we boarded the plane for Haneda, I already knew that I was among friends.

The themes of people-centric, emotionally intelligent instruction continued throughout the entire program. One of our first classes was the field-do walk, where we were introduced to college student volunteers who joined us in strolling and sketching the Kita-Urawa neighborhood. I appreciated how this activity encouraged us to slow down and pay careful attention to our surroundings; it was an exercise in mindfulness that set the tone for how we engaged with language and culture during the following weeks.

This led naturally into some of our first lessons, concerning cultural “icebergs” and the ways in which we can understand deeper cultural values by noticing small, but impactful, details in everyday situations. Later, we were given multiple opportunities to appreciate Japanese culture through various outlets: workshops on washi, sake, taiko, and furoshiki (which became a motif for our group), as well as a visit to a local secondary school. Overall, I felt that the program had a strong emphasis on cultural literacy, which also facilitated rigorous language practice as we engaged in various workshops.



All the teachers and guides that worked with us were incredibly warm, professional, and personable. I felt comfortable asking questions and asking for help from every teacher. One moment that stood out was when we were writing reports on our visit to the local school. I wrote my report on various ways that safety concerns in US schools impact our procedures and even architecture in ways that schools in Japan do not have to worry about, and some of the differences this makes. I showed my report to Ukai-sensei before I submitted it, and her response to my topic was so encouraging and empathetic.



The program provided time not only for great cultural experiences, but also professional development and pedagogical collaboration. One project allowed us to form groups based on cultural interests, then develop and present lesson plans based on those aspects of Japanese culture. So, we were able to not only develop our language skills and cultural knowledge, we were also able to create and share lesson plans and resources for us to use in the future.

The institute itself felt clean, safe, and very friendly. I looked forward not only to spending time with my newfound friends, but also the smiles and cheerful “ohayou gozaimasu!” I would hear from everyone working at the Japan Foundation each morning, or “itterasshai!” as we left in the afternoons to explore.

The facilities were incredibly clean and convenient, and I felt like I could relax and not worry about many daily necessities and focus on studying. There were kitchenettes, laundry rooms, and seating areas on every floor, and our group often spent time together in the common areas right up until lights out. The food in the cafeteria was also delicious, and it was a relief to not have to worry about cooking or cleaning and to just focus on learning and collaborating. There was even a room for karaoke and ping pong, which we and other groups used almost every night.



Another aspect of the institute that I greatly enjoyed was getting to interact with teachers that were at the institute with other programs and from other countries. Communicating with folks who are also Japanese second-language learners but have a different first language from myself was something I hadn't experienced before. I am always amazed at how the Japanese language opens doors that I never even knew existed.