

2015 J-LEAP REPORT: YUKIHIRO SAKAMOTO  
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### 2015 J-LEAP REPORT BY YUKIHIRO SAKAMOTO

*Alisal High School  
Salinas, CA*

*Buenos dias!* Welcome to the “Salad Bowl of the World,” also known as Salinas, California, home of Nobel Prize author, John Steinbeck and the location of one of America’s top 4 rodeos.

My name is Yukihiro Sakamoto and I grew up in Nara, Japan where I studied diligently to learn

English so that I may travel to the United States to improve my English language skills and to share with others my love for Japan. Little did I realize I would have to learn another language in America: Spanish. Since I already knew Japanese, Korean, and English, I welcomed a new language into my linguistics repertoire. By the way, *Buenos dias* is simply “Good morning” in Spanish, the home language for 98% of the Latino students at Alisal High School, where I teach as an assistant language teacher with my lead teacher, Ms. Mio Nishimura.

Alisal High School has the reputation of being a rough school situated in the east side of Salinas; however, all the students enrolled in Japanese are some of the kindest and most thoughtful students on campus. I’m proud of being a family of Trojans, the mascot of Alisal High School.

Settling in a new country is always difficult and challenging but I was fortunate to have three different host families: Japanese, Mexican, and American.

Each family was helpful to me and I felt lucky to have had this unique experience. My first family was the Japanese family; this made my transition to American culture a more comfortable move. Thanks to their great support, I got a California driver's license, bought a VW car, and purchased car insurance within a few weeks of arrival. My second family spoke Spanish at home; thus, I carried a Japanese-Spanish dictionary at all times and communicated with gestures and some Spanish vocabulary. I quickly learned polite phrases such as *gracias* for *arigato* and important terms such as *comida* for *taberu*. Also I experienced Mexican cuisine every day and learned about the Mexican culture. By the time I moved in with my 3rd host family, I was immersed in English; they spoke no Japanese and no Spanish. With my 3rd host family, I experienced major holidays in America such as Thanksgiving Day and Christmas.

When I was informed I would be teaching in California, I was ecstatic! After all, isn't that where Hollywood and Disneyland are located? Little did I know it would be an 8 hour car ride to the world renowned areas of Southern California: Malibu, Universal Studios, and miles of beaches. A quick search on the Internet made me even more excited that Salinas, California was located in the middle of the huge state and the ocean and beaches were as close as a 30-minute drive. There are famous tourist spots near Salinas such as Carmel-by-the Sea, Monterey, and Big Sur. And, these became easy weekend destinations for me. How refreshing and invigorating it is to know I can see wild seals and otters almost anytime I wanted.

I thought I learned all there was to know about teaching after the 3-week teaching practicum in Japan. NOT! After all, I had been attending school as a student and observing teachers for 12 years in Japan. What else can I learn about teaching? The education system in America is completely different from my experiences as a student and as a teacher. The main difference with learning languages between Alisal High School in America and schools in Japan is that the teacher stays in the target language; therefore, only Japanese is spoken in my Japanese classes. Alisal High School offers Japanese 1-2, 3-4, and AP. Whether a student is taking first year of Japanese or is in his/her 3rd year, only Japanese is spoken in the classroom. Various strategies such as incorporating Total Physical Response, using pictures and authentic material, and demonstrating conversation in team teaching are used to convey the meaning.

I am excited that I am at a school where the District supports its Japanese program. Already, I have participated in the District's Karaoke Contest where I performed a dance called "Youkai-Taiso" with 50 other Japanese language students in the District. This month I am working with my students on their entries to the New Year Letter Contest. In another month I will have the opportunity to critique my students' speeches for the Monterey County Japanese Speech Contest. I am most impressed with how the school and District go out of its way to introduce Japanese culture to students. A highlight of my school day is always when students ask me questions about my experiences in this country and what I like about Japan. Of course, I am eager to share my thoughts with them, and I raise their level of interest when I tell them to share their ideas with me. In this manner, we both learn from one another. I remind them that I may be in America to teach Japanese language and culture, but I am also here to learn about America and its culture!

There are not enough pages for me to share all that I have learned in America in only 6 months! Since I have been fortunate to live in three different host families, I can confidently say that there is not just one tradition for holidays in America. For example, I read about Americans eating turkey for Thanksgiving, and for most families, that is true; however, I experienced a Chinese banquet with Peking duck for Thanksgiving Day. I felt good I was able to introduce KFC to my host family for Christmas. In Nara, my family had to pre-order the chicken and wait in a long line to pick up the food. In America, the KFC restaurant was basically empty. Only one customer sat at the table and he was reading a book. Needless to say, we got our order immediately.

You might think that my stay in America looks like one long vacation; that is far from the truth. Most of my waking hours are spent on campus team-teaching, creating materials with Nishimura-sensei, and helping students with their homework.

Being a J-LEAP assistant teacher exposed me to a plethora of teaching strategies and styles I can incorporate in my classroom in Japan; however, just as important are the survival skills I gained living in America. The program's expectations includes accomplishing the following tasks during the first month upon arrival in the U.S.: purchase a car, sign up for car insurance, obtain a driver's license, secure a cell phone and cell service plan, apply for a Social Security Number, and find an apartment after homestay ended. These requirements were somewhat easily fulfilled with the tremendous help of my host families, Nishimura-sensei, school staff, and the Japanese language teachers in the District.



During the two years of this program, I hope to make a positive impact on my students with my teaching of the Japanese language and culture. I want to impress upon my American students the good outcomes of a positive attitude, a wider perspective on life, and a view of the world through another language. I look forward to the day when I can have a reunion with my American students in Japan. I am already making mental notes of how I can organize homestays for these students on their visit in Japan.

Recently I received permission from the principal to start the school's first Aikido Club; it will meet once a week after school. I cannot wait to have my first meeting next month. Because of liability issues, the school district insists the J-LEAP assistant teacher must work with an American credentialed teacher to start a club; thank goodness, I found a mathematics teacher

willing to help. Thanks to a stipend from Japan Foundation I can buy tatami mats for the club so I can introduce one aspect of Japanese culture outside the classroom with not only students taking Japanese but other students, too.

In addition, I want to learn all I can about American culture so that I can share my passion with my new classroom in Japan. I want to show my future Japanese students things from America. I have already amassed a suitcase filled with authentic materials for my classroom in Japan: American newspapers, magazines, restaurant menus, travel brochures, posters, “super-sized” soda paper cups, popular fast food containers, and an array of trinkets with the U.S. flag or its colors. I believe understanding each other’s language and culture, lifestyles and perspectives will further the development of the Japan and U.S. relationship. World peace can stem from countries learning about and understanding the ideas of other countries.

I would be remiss if I did not thank Nishimura-sensei, the entire staff at Alisal High School, and my host families. With their great kindness and support, I settled down in my new American life and I am enjoying my precious time in America. Arigato.

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