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A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE

JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION UPDATE 38: SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE JAPANESE CLASSROOM

by Amanda Rollins, Japanese Language Program Coordinator

Last month at the 2016 [ACTFL](#) Annual Convention and World Languages Expo in Boston, 2012 Teacher of the Year Mr. Yo Azama (North Salinas High School) and [AATJ](#) President Dr. Yoshiko Saito-Abbott (California State University Monterey Bay), presented a session titled “Social Justice in the Language Classroom: Impact on Global Citizenship.” The room was absolutely packed with language teachers of all kinds.

According to both presenters, social issues are normally reserved for advanced language classes. It has been assumed that lower level students simply do not have the necessary vocabulary and fluency to debate and share opinions on such topics. However, since the **Advanced Placement (AP) Japanese Language and Culture** exam was implemented, teachers have been asked to include themes like “global challenges” and “current affairs” in their high school classrooms. Discussing social justice inspires students to think critically and to develop their own voice, important 21st-century skills.



“I was scared of taking that leap,” Azama said during the session, “but why not bring your inner activist into a lesson? Teachers always want to have the right answers, we want to have control. But we have to give away the control a little bit to take a risk.” He went on to say that

discussing Japan’s social justice issues gives students freedom and space to talk about the uncomfortable issues within a neutral country. During the session, Azama showed a video in which his third-year students interacted during a typical classroom activity. They slowly made simple but powerful statements like, “Japan’s poverty rate is not good. I think that is sad.”

Pedagogically speaking, the presenters spoke about “content-driven language instruction.” Instead of giving students a list of vocabulary to memorize, Azama gave the students the chance to absorb words from videos and infographics. Because the topics are so important, the students remember the terms more easily and “I don’t have to repeat words so many times!”

In addition to the thematic unit on poverty, Dr. Saito-Abbott spoke about her University collaboration with Community Partnership for Youth (CPY), an organization which provides alternatives to gangs, drugs, and violence. For 20 years, her university students majoring in Japanese have been teaching language and culture to at-risk youths after school through her Advanced Japanese Service Learning class. In the class students discuss the importance of social justice awareness and responsibility. In order to teach units on social justice issues, “building trust in class is so important,” Dr. Saito-Abbott stated. “Encourage students to act locally, think globally.”

The session ended with enthusiastic applause and thoughtful discussion.

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