

## NOVEMBER, 2012: BREEZE ISSUE #61

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



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Hi, My name is Tae Okuda, and I am currently working as a teaching assistant at Verdugo Woodlands Elementary School in California.

Verdugo Woodlands Elementary School has a unique program called the Foreign Language Academy of Glendale - Japanese (FLAG Japanese), where the children learn their subjects evenly in both English and in

Japanese. The program started in 2010, and there are currently 148 students enrolled in grades K through 3.

The program is very unique in that students learn all subjects in both languages, as opposed to studying one particular language in Japanese and another in English. Unlike the way adults learn a second language, such as through the Grammar Translation Model, children in our program actually learn Japanese through content area instruction.

FLAG Japanese students have varying backgrounds, meaning some children are almost as fluent as native Japanese speakers, while others are better in English, and some children have parents with Japanese background, while others do not. The mix of Japanese and non-Japanese speaking students is about half and half. As you can imagine, there are tremendous challenges for both children and teachers in our program. Since there are different levels of Japanese language proficiency in each class, I cannot help but wonder how a teacher can effectively differentiate in the classroom, or how children can acquire a new language without any direct grammar instruction (like the way Japanese language schools teach). Children in our program are actually learning subjects such as social studies or science in both English and Japanese. For example, 3rd grade just finished learning the subject of "Economy" in Japanese. As you can imagine, the subject itself is new to all the students, but in addition, the language used in the class (Japanese) is also new to many students. In order for the students to understand the concepts, the teacher always has to come up with or consider ideas like visualizing the word using a sketch or preparing extra steps for the explanation.

One of my roles as a teaching assistant is to model Japanese speaking; I am only allowed to speak Japanese in the class to encourage the students to speak Japanese themselves. I try to speak to the students in Japanese as much as possible, even if they don't understand what I am saying. This is really one of the most challenging parts of my role at the moment. When I have to discipline some children who don't understand Japanese well, it becomes especially challenging. They tend to be less attentive due to the lack of understanding. In such cases, I need extra effort to communicate with them, and I do not always succeed.

I am also involved in the 3rd grade's Kanji study, homework club, for those who have less command of Japanese, and other activities in the classroom. For the Kindergarten class, I mainly support the main Japanese teacher and make sure that all the children can understand their activities and the teacher's instructions. The greatest part of being in the kindergarten class is that I can observe how children who are completely new to the Japanese language acquire Japanese from scratch. It has been almost 2 months since I started working with them. In the beginning, some children seemed to have no clue what was going on in the class, but now, they can say some greetings, ask permission, ask help, count from 1 to 10 and name colors. It is really a pleasure to see their improvement day by day.

I am thinking that the experience I gain here could be used very well in Japan. It would be helpful to think about non-native Japanese learners who are studying in Japanese public schools and who don't get much support in the classroom. I feel that I have plenty of opportunities to examine some of the hypotheses made by various researchers studying how children learn languages and become better second language learners.

Finally, I have set 3 goals for J-LEAP. First is to have a concrete idea about what the Japanese immersion program is. Second is to have specific skills for class management, especially skills to communicate and deal with children who have less Japanese skills. Lastly, while I am here, I also hope that I can introduce as many Japanese books as possible, because I think reading is very important for second language learners. I have started reading some books to the 3rd graders every week. If they come to know the enjoyment of reading in Japanese in the end, I would be more than happy.

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