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



2013 J-LEAP REPORT BY MOE TAKAHASHI

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Do you like camping in deep evergreen woods? Do you like hanging out at beautiful beaches? Do you like snowboarding on icy mountains? Guess what, Oregon has all of this and more.

Hello, my name is Moe Takahashi and I am currently working at Lake Oswego High School (LOHS) and Lakeridge High School (LHS) in the state of Oregon. Both schools are public high schools and located about 20 minutes south of Portland. As I mentioned, Oregon has plentiful nature and with so much to do, you will never get bored.

I am co-teaching at both schools with Charlotte Stewart sensei and it has been a great experience for me. We have about 70 students at LOHS and about 55 students at LHS. Luckily, the district believes that language learning is very important to the students, and both schools offer Spanish, French, Chinese and Japanese as elective classes. Now we are offering Japanese 1, Japanese 2, and Japanese 3/4 as a combined class. We have an average of 20 students in each class, which is a good size for language learning. Students have 90 minutes of Japanese class every other day at both schools.

It has been a big challenge for both Charlotte sensei and me to co-teach, but we strongly believe it is a great opportunity for our students. It is a nice advantage for them to have both a native Japanese speaker and American Japanese teacher in the classroom at the same time. They get to use Japanese with a native speaker and ask questions about current Japan whenever they want. I would like my students to feel confident when talking to native speakers and have chances to use Japanese more outside the classroom. Also, one of my roles in the classroom is to help them with their pronunciation. On the other hand, Charlotte sensei knows what kinds of problems English speaking people have learning Japanese from her own experience and she can help with addressing those problems when our students face them. She can also tell them about Japanese language and culture from a different point of view than I can. Students often would like to know tips to learn Japanese and she is a great person to ask. We try to do everything as a team in the lessons and we are happy to say that it is working pretty well.

Charlotte sensei has an interesting teaching method, and I am learning from her a lot every day. For example, we sing a lot in the classroom, we use physical motions to remember words and phrases, we have games in almost every class, and we draw pictures with characters and so on. We also make sure that they always get to use Japanese with their peers in the classroom. The most important thing is that our students have lots of fun in the classroom! Learning a language is not easy, but by having a great atmosphere in the classroom, our students enjoy the new experiences making learning that much easier.

Now the first semester is over, but when I think back to the beginning of the semester, it took me a while to get used to American schools. They are very different from Japanese ones in many ways. The biggest difference is that teachers and students use more technology for learning. At both schools, we have smart boards in every class and it gives students various ways to learn. We also have a Language Lab that gives students more opportunities to work on listening skills, speaking skills, and typing skills. One of my challenges is to master that technology and use it in an effective way. Another difference is that the teachers' interaction with students is very open and friendly. It seems to me that teachers try to build trust via communication to make learning easier for students. Also, students here have more freedom at school in general. They wear what they want and express what they think. Therefore, we tend to get a lot of questions during classes and sometimes it gets hard to manage them. This does show that American students are more involved in class discussions. In these ways, it is truly a whole different world for me and, in the first three months I certainly experienced culture shock. By observing other classes and other schools, however, I came to understand how to deal with these differences. I also taught at a middle school in the same district as a guest teacher. It was a cultural exploration class for 6th grade, and I introduced some basic Japanese culture and phrases. By teaching and interacting with middle school students, I think it helped me to understand the American education system better.

I strongly believe that language learning can be a life changing experience. Teaching language is not only a chance to give students information (although it makes me happy when they are able to use what we taught them!), but also to foster a wide-range and in-depth general ability. As teachers, we are responsible for cultivating future leaders in our community; therefore, I would like our students to expand their views of the world, liberalize their experience, and make them more flexible and tolerant by learning Japanese. What makes language education interesting is I always learn something new from my students in return. They always bring up their own knowledge and surprise me in many ways, which helps me grow with them as a teacher.

Lastly, I am so grateful for the environment and people who support me here. I am looking forward to learning more and more with my students and to be more involved with activities that promote Japanese culture in the community this year.

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