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



2014 J-LEAP REPORT BY MIHO KOBAYASHI

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Hello, my name is Miho Kobayashi and I am working as an Assistant Teacher at Verdugo Woodlands Elementary School in Glendale, California.

This is a public school with a Japanese dual immersion program called The Foreign Language Academy of Glendale (FLAG) – Japanese. The school also has traditional English-only classes just like other public elementary schools. The program was started in 2010, so this is the sixth year of its existence. There are currently 20 – 24 students per class from kindergarten through fifth grade and for Japanese, there are two classes each for first, second, and third grade, along with one class each for the other grades. Usually there are two teachers per grade level;

one for English and one for Japanese instruction. The students who attend this program study several subjects every day such as Math, Science, and Social Studies in both English and Japanese. They study in each of the languages for half of the day.

Some of the students attend the school with a special permit while others move into the district just for this program. This shows that the program is popular and valuable for parents who are passionate in having their children learn Japanese. Also, it can be seen that the parents have high expectations in our program for their child to learn Japanese. As proof of the success of our program, another elementary school in the district has also started their own immersion program this school year.

Although the students at our school have a diverse background with varying levels of Japanese language ability, teachers and students speak only in Japanese during the Japanese side of lessons. So we speak nearly 100% of the time using Japanese. Some students have parents who have a Japanese background and can fluently speak and use Japanese like a native speaker because they use it at home on daily basis and also go to Japanese supplementary school on weekends. On the other hand, some students don't have any Japanese background at all, and have been learning it since they entered the school. However, the more the students can understand what the teacher says and try, little by little, to speak Japanese to teachers and their friends, the more they seem to enjoy learning Japanese. It is a pleasure for me to work at a place that has an immersion program and to see how the children become bilingual.

Since working at the school, I have been fortunate enough to be given many opportunities as an assistant teacher, such as supporting the lead teacher, leading some lessons, and suggesting ideas about activities and assignments for class. However, the main part of my role is to model Japanese speaking and writing Kana including Hiragana and Katakana as a native Japanese speaker. My lead teacher, Shiomi-sensei usually asks questions to the students as her morning routine and she routinely asks me to model the responses to her questions and also demonstrate how to communicate in Japanese in front of the students.

One of the great opportunities I've had is to read aloud once a week during our library time. I choose picture books to read to the students. I believe it is a good opportunity for the students to hear Japanese stories even if they don't understand the whole story. When I read a book, I try to read it so that everyone could enjoy it, regardless of their language level. I read the lines like the characters speak, point to the pictures and ask questions about the words that the students might know, have them guess what will happen next, and ask questions about the story once I am done reading. Also, I explain words that students might not know. So, I hope they enjoy the story and learn some new words. Now, the lead teacher and I are planning to expand the number of books in our library because the students are interested in reading Japanese picture books themselves.

The most challenging thing to me was teaching Japanese Kana (alphabet) to the First graders. Luckily, I had the opportunity to make the lesson plans and teach the lesson myself. When I was planning the lessons, I knew that I needed to take small steps in teaching oral, listening, reading, and writing of the Kana for the students so that they could remember and use it correctly. Those are the big differences between teaching Japanese to native Japanese students at an elementary school in Japan and to non-native Japanese speakers at a school in the U.S. As a part of learning Kana, students have to practice writing it as homework eve

week and I correct their assignments. I try to show the students how to write Kana correctly. I worry that if I correct them too much, I might receive complaints from the parents. Despite this, I have received positive feedback from the parents who appreciate my attention to detail and I realized that showing proper technique to write Kana is a strength of native Japanese speakers who work as assistant teacher on this program.

Additionally, I also create teaching materials such as worksheets for the lessons, and bulletins for the classroom. I sometimes create them myself but I mostly talk with the lead teacher to collaborate our ideas in creating better materials. I learned that we should put pictures on the teaching materials to help the students understand effectively. We are now working on Kanji worksheets and flash cards and I hope they will be useful even after I leave the school.

In the future, I would like to find more opportunities to teach students outside of our Japanese program and plan events and activities to spread Japanese culture to the rest of the community here in Southern California. It would be a pleasure to see more people gain a fond interest in the Japanese culture.

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