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



### 2015 J-LEAP REPORT BY SEIJI ARAI

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Hello. My name is Seiji Arai. I have been working as an assistant Japanese teacher at Madison Country Day School (MCDS) in Waunakee, which is located 15 minutes away from Madison, the capital of Wisconsin. Our school is in the countryside and is surrounded by beautiful nature such as trees and a lake. Some people might say that it is inconvenient. However, I think that the location is great for the students because they can enjoy the changing seasons and this environment makes us feel relaxed. We can also see wild cranes on the field in front of the school; it was the most surprising thing to see when I came to school for the first time. There are 403 students at MCDS from Pre-K to 12th grade. Since this summer, MCDS has been gradually expanding the buildings and the total number of students has also increased.

With respect to foreign language education, MCDS provides students with the opportunity to learn Spanish and Japanese. Spanish is introduced in Pre-K and is required for lower and middle school students. Some students even continue to take Spanish classes when they enter high school. On the other hand, some students begin to study Japanese as a foreign language from 9th grade.

Currently, there are 39 students in Japanese class from 9th to 12th grade. There are seven 9th grade students, fifteen 10th grade students, nine 11th grade students, and eight 12th grade students. MCDS is an authorized International Baccalaureate (IB) school, which is a kind of university program, so students need to prepare for IB examinations in 11th grade. It is q

challenging for us to cover the IB curriculum in a 45 minutes class without making the students just memorize required knowledge. We like to include fun activities as well. From 5th to 8th grade, students can take Japanese as an elective class once a week. This class mainly focuses on introducing Japanese cultures through some enjoyable activities, and 13 students are taking it this year.

First of all, I was very surprised by the student's super high motivation toward learning Japanese. They are very energetic and always show us an attitude that reflects their commitment to the class. At the beginning of each class, we usually have free conversation time, which is called "What's Up," time for a few minutes. In the activity, students try to explain how their day was in Japanese, even if they haven't been learning for a long time, such as the 9th and 10th graders. In addition, there is no hesitation or shyness about making mistakes, which might be totally different from English learners in Japan. They even seem to enjoy communicating in Japanese in the classroom. I think that this factor is very important and definitely necessary for language learning, and feel that such an atmosphere might be because of my lead teacher; Karen sensei's policy. She has the belief that using Japanese not only in the classroom, but also outside of classroom will help improve our students' language skills and motivate them to use Japanese, so she keeps talking with them in Japanese as much as possible. These daily actions might lead students to get used to speaking Japanese naturally as part of their daily life and it might also create a classroom atmosphere without the fear of making mistakes. MCDS has a sister school in Ibaraki Prefecture of Japan and some Japanese students from the school recently visited MCDS. While the Japanese students were here, we could see that our students were trying to actively to speak in Japanese. That was great and I was very glad to see it.



In our class, we don't use English very much when we explain the lesson to our students. Instead, we often use body language and facial expressions, and we sometimes do impromptu roleplays. In addition, we have been trying to use various styles of collaboration in class. One of the most applied collaboration style is team teaching and it is often used to review a previous lesson or explain a grammar point. The second style used in a class is the one teach-one assistant. We switch between LT and AT frequently, depending on the lesson content, so that means that I sometimes lead a class as a LT. As for other styles, station teaching and parallel teaching are used in our class to promote classroom activities effectively. Whichever collaboration style we use, there is one major point of emphasis in our class. That is "enjoyment in learning." Karen sensei and I think that having fun studying is a very essential factor in language learning and teachers also need to enjoy supporting their students. Therefore, we have been trying to use various materials and sometimes include ourselves live examples. We can become a bit goofy as teaching materials!

It has already been about three months since I started teaching Japanese in MCDS and I have realized that I am in a great environment to develop myself not only as a language learner but also as a Japanese teacher. Students are great models who show me how I should face non-native language learning, and Karen sensei also shows me what kind of teacher I should be in the future. Two things on my list of goals as a J-LEAP teacher are to inspire people, and to motivate them to go to Japan. Every moment is a valuable experience and I am very lucky to be here for two years. I hope that I can achieve my goals in the short amount of time I am here, and I am going to keep making every effort towards that end.

Breeze #98



Breeze #97



Japanese Language Education Update 24

ACTFL 2015

2015 Teacher Training Program: Sueyon Seo

2015 J-LEAP Report: Ami Kaneko

2015 J-LEAP Report: Seiji Arai

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Claire Endl

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Dillon Evans

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Nicholas Gallitano

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Isabelle Joyce

Breeze #96



Breeze #95



Breeze #94

Breeze #93



Breeze #92



Breeze #91



Breeze #90



Breeze #89



Breeze #88



Breeze #87



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