

2024/2025 J-LEAP REPORT



By Sawako Watanabe

Torrance High School

Torrance, CA

みなさん、こんにちは！ My name is Sawako Watanabe. I work at Torrance High School as a Japanese assistant teacher. I have always been interested in cultural exchange, and during my university years, I participated in another program by Japan Foundation called Nihongo partners. After graduating from university, I worked at the logistics company in Japan. I decided to participate in the J-LEAP program because I wanted to share about Japan with people in the U.S.

The City of Torrance

Torrance is a city in Los Angeles County, California, located southwest of Los Angeles. Torrance is known for its large Japanese and Japanese-American community. There are many shops and restaurants here that offer Japanese culture and cuisine. When I first came here, I was amazed at how similar it felt to Japan. One day, I randomly picked a movie on Netflix to watch. It was a movie called Unbroken and it tells the story of Louie Zamperini, former Olympic track star who was captured and held in a Japanese camp during the war. I was surprised at the beginning of the movie because the main character was from Torrance High School. This reminded me that Torrance has many connections to Japan in various ways.

Japanese Program in Torrance High School

At Torrance High School, there are four different levels of Japanese classes and about 160 students study Japanese. There are two Japanese teachers. My LT is Stuart Jones-sensei. We are in charge of Japanese level 1, 3, and AP. He has been teaching Japanese in Torrance High School for more than 10 years. Throughout the day at the high school, I often hear students calling



Mr. Jones "Sensei!" all the time. I am grateful to be involved in the program that he has built over a long period of time.



Currently, my role in the class is to help with the introduction of lessons and assist individual students who may have questions or are struggling. During lunch breaks and tutorials, students come to me, and we have a lot of conversations in Japanese. Seeing students use the Japanese they have learned to speak with me makes me very happy.

Daily Life

I am currently staying with a host family, and I really enjoy spending time talking with them about various topics. Since coming to Torrance, I have been attending various gatherings to meet as many people as possible. Outside of school hours, I spend time hiking with local people, playing futsal, and studying with those who are learning Japanese. The people I meet here come from diverse backgrounds, and listening to their stories is fascinating. While talking to people, I sometimes find myself deeply reflecting on questions like, "What does it mean to be Japanese?" and "I am Japanese, but why is that so? Is it simply because I was born in Japan?" These questions make me think more deeply about myself and Japan. During the rest of my stay, I want to learn more about American culture and lifestyle. I plan to take on experiences that are unique to being in the U.S., and I hope to share what I feel and learn about America when I return to Japan. I want to make the most of my time here by having many experiences as possible that can only be done in America and enjoying them fully.

My future goals of J-LEAP

My goal is to work with my LT, Jones sensei to improve the Japanese program at Torrance High School. By "improve," I mean creating an environment where students can enjoy learning Japanese, experience real-life situations and authentic aspects of Japan, and develop flexible thinking through the language. When I was in high school, I studied abroad at an American high school for two weeks. From that experience, I discovered the joy of connecting with people from different cultures and languages, which has shaped who I am today. I hope that my presence here will positively influence the students at Torrance High School, even if just a little.

In the Japanese classroom, there are often times when things don't go as planned or when I don't get the reactions from students that I expected. But no matter the situation, I want to keep trying and working toward this goal.

Another goal is to experience and learn about Japanese language education in America from various perspectives. There are four high schools within the Torrance District, and all of them offer Japanese. Additionally, there are Saturday Japanese schools in nearby areas, and some schools have immersion programs for Japanese. These provide opportunities to learn different methods, goals, and styles of Japanese language education. I want to make the most of these opportunities to study the diversity of Japanese language education, and education itself.

Lastly, I am truly grateful to have become a part of J-LEAP and for all the support I have received. Living in another country can sometimes feel difficult. However, thanks to Jones-sensei, the other Japanese teachers, my host family, everyone involved in the J-LEAP program, all the people I've met here, and my family and friends in Japan, I can live a safe and enjoyable life in America. I will keep in mind that I am here thanks to the support around me, and I will do my best to share Japan with as many people as possible.