

# 2022/2023 Teacher Training Program Report

**By Elijah Sprints**

*Roosevelt High School*

*Portland, OR*

When I'm asked for an interesting fact about myself, I almost always say that I have been learning Japanese for most of my life. In fact, taking a quick count, at this point I've completed over twenty cumulative school years of Japanese language instruction. So, I can say with certainty that the experience that I had this summer as a language teacher trainee at the Japan Foundation's Japanese language institute in Urawa was one of a kind. Together with forty Japanese language teachers from across the globe, I had the fortunate opportunity to join a very special training program for non-heritage teachers of the Japanese language.

We were there to advance our knowledge of the language, culture, and to grow as educators who represent a place that we love. In all, we came from an astounding nineteen different countries, and no matter our background, we all shared a distinct fascination for Japan, and the Japanese people. We were also there to bring home new knowledge and techniques for learning Japanese at any level and participate in an experience that few Japanese teachers and learners get to have. We embarked on a journey of sharing ourselves, our families, and personal stories through our common language of Japanese, and experienced the Japanese world in ways that linked to our hearts and created deeper connections that will surely have an impact on how we guide our students on their own journeys.

Some notable experiences were interactive cultural activities like a hands-on wadaiko drum performance, a sadou tea ceremony, and kirigami, an artform that has few modern-day practitioners, in which a single piece of paper is cut into animals and landscapes. After an impeccable kirigami performance by Masaharu Yamashita, a professional paper cutter, we got to try our hand at cutting our own shapes with his guidance. Those moments were some of the highlights for me during the training. The hands-on experiences felt so valuable and many of the art forms we got a glimpse at are just the tip of the iceberg for Japanese arts and crafts for us to explore with our own

students in the classroom. One of my favorites, that I'll definitely be taking back to my students, is chigiri-e, an art form in which you use colored paper that is torn to create images and may resemble a sort of watercolor painting. We used magazines and newspapers and created vibrant images that are worth all the eventual clean up from bits and pieces of scrap paper. When we went to Kanazawa to see the vast and splendid gardens, castle and experience a true tea ceremony we got an in-depth look into some of the nuances of ancient cultural practices. We also interviewed the staff at the language center in our comprehensive Japanese literature class about manga and its impact on other art forms as well as its roots in Japan. After talking with one of the staff at the institute, my image of the graphic artform has changed tremendously. In fact, deeper meanings of a variety of Japanese art forms began to show up in many places I wasn't expecting throughout the training. This is another thing that I can already sense is impacting my own students so far this school year. I feel confident now that I can provide experiences and interactions with a real-world Japan while being a guide that can go deeper into countries' many singularly unique qualities.

As a new teacher of Japanese language, I believe that this experience will be valuable in innumerable ways for me in the future, especially as an educator and practitioner of the language. In addition, since my knowledge of the educational vocabulary and verbiage has grown, I'll be better able to communicate with my Japanese teacher colleagues as we develop core curriculum for Japanese language programs throughout our school district.

All of us at the training, whether this was our first time in Japan or the tenth, bring home a more developed image of Japan, one where our language abilities can help us create long lasting relationships. I found it so special that we could connect with each other in a language other than English. I see it as having three birds in one nest. We got to see how our heritages were similar and different while we also developed our own abilities and got hands-on training in how to do the same for our students. Things like skill-specific strategies useful for communication in Japanese culture classes, and useful teaching materials for Japanese life and culture, are some things that come to mind that I will be showing to my students. Finally, all the classes were taught by experienced teachers who had a wealth of knowledge about language education.

One of the experiences that left the biggest impression on me was interacting with students from Tokorozawa High School. I was able to get a good perspective on what

kind of lives Japanese high school students lead. I plan to use experiences like these to inform my own work with Japanese high schoolers. At the high school that I now work at in Portland, Oregon, our goal this school year is to develop relationships with several Japanese schools. My experience with high schoolers will undoubtedly help with making exchange programs as rich as possible with positive experiences and learning opportunities that create long lasting friendships.

The friendships I now have with my fellow trainees are testament to those types of opportunities. We were able to interact with the forty other participants in the program, learn about the cultures of our various countries, and learn how to teach Japanese better. I'm so grateful for all the folks that were in 4th level class with me. It was such a pleasure to interact with everyone in that class and to bring ourselves, our families, and our respective cultures together. We grew together and built connective bridges to each other that will last a lifetime. Our shared love for Japan gave everyone a chance to truly communicate with each other at the training and delve deeper into Japan's many fascinating features. And our hearts were open to the many incredible opportunities we were provided to explore, get to know the people, and participate in the beautiful experience of seeing eye-to-eye with someone who comes from someplace far away from our own.

While I grow as a student of Japanese, one discovery that keeps occurring, is that no matter our cultural practices, we all have a shared humanity that surpasses our backgrounds. This fact is something that we can share with our students: if we are able to gather perspectives different from our own, and truly listen and consider where others are coming from, we might be able to make this world a better place. So, to my fellow trainees, let's go back to our own countries, share what we have learned at the center with each of our schools, and do our best to spread this wonderful Japanese language and culture around the world.



4th level class, on the left at our graduation ceremony, and on the right on our last day of classes. In all, we were from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Ukraine, Mongolia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the USA.



Posing with our many different paper cuttings at the Kirigami experience.



Japan Foundation summer language institute, Urawa, Japan; Summer 2022

Participants from forty countries including: Laos, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Nepal, Mongolia, Ukraine, Canada, New Zealand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, USA, Madagascar, and Dominican Republic