2026 Special Training Program for Japanese-Language Teachers Report



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Being a non-native teacher of Japanese is both rewarding and, at times, challenging. There is something incredibly fulfilling about teaching what you are passionate about and helping students begin their own journey with Japanese language and culture. At the same time, we as non-native teachers can sometimes feel like lone soldiers, navigating the profession without many colleagues who truly understand our experiences or the unique challenges we face.

As a lecturer and the coordinator of my university's Japanese program, I have spent the last several years advocating for changes that better align with the needs and interests of today's students while also seeking support and recognition beyond my own department. When I first heard about the Japan Foundation's training program for non-native teachers of Japanese, I immediately felt a sense of relief. Simply knowing that there was a program created specifically for educators like us made me feel that our contributions and experiences were being recognized. Although very little information about the program had been released at the time, I trusted that it would be worthwhile. In the end, it became far more meaningful than I ever expected.

When I arrived in Los Angeles for orientation, I expected to spend the day learning about the schedule before heading to Japan. Instead, I found myself surrounded by 25 educators whose stories sounded surprisingly familiar. Throughout the day, we shared our accomplishments, our struggles, and the realities of sustaining Japanese language programs at our own institutions. Despite representing primary schools, colleges, and universities from across the country, many of us had encountered similar challenges in building and supporting Japanese language programs. Before boarding our flight to Japan, I realized something I had not expected. I was no longer carrying those experiences alone.

What impressed me most about the training program was not simply the number of activities we participated in, but how thoughtfully everything had been planned. The lectures, workshops, cultural experiences, and site visits all complemented one another, creating opportunities to learn from professionals in the field while reflecting, discussing, and immediately applying what we had covered. What made the program especially meaningful was the balance between becoming better educators and

simply being present as learners ourselves.

The lectures challenged us to think more deeply about our teaching, while the excursions reminded us of the curiosity and appreciation that brought many of us to Japanese language and culture in the first place. Whether we were learning about sake production, trying our hand at traditional washi paper making, sharing meals together, or traveling to Noto to witness the remarkable rebuilding efforts following the 2025 earthquake, each experience gave us a deeper understanding of the communities, traditions, and resilience that continue to shape Japan as a country and society.



Ironically, it was during these excursions that our own community truly began to form. Conversations that had started during orientation became deeper and more personal. We laughed together, shared stories from our classrooms, exchanged teaching ideas, and openly discussed the successes and frustrations that come with this profession. Several staff members at the Japan Foundation Center even mentioned that others around the center had commented on how energetic our group seemed. In hindsight, I think our enthusiasm came from something much deeper than simply enjoying the activities. We had found people who genuinely understood one another.

One of the moments that had the greatest impact on me was Dr. Shinji Sato's discussion on community, identity, and ways those themes can be meaningfully incorporated into the Japanese language classroom. These are ideas that have always been central to my own teaching philosophy, especially since more than 70% of the students at my university identify as members of minority communities. His presentation challenged me to think even more deeply about the role language education can play in helping students build meaningful connections, not only with Japanese language and culture, but also with themselves and with those around them.

For Dr Sato's assignment, we reflected on our biggest takeaways, designed classroom activities inspired by those discussions, and presented them in a poster-session format where the other participants could freely choose which presentations to hear. During orientation, I remember saying that one of my biggest hopes for this program was to find inspiration, and without realizing it at the time, this assignment became exactly that. As I worked through the details of our group's original activity, I found myself reconnecting with the vision that led me to take on the role of coordinator in the first place. It reaffirmed my desire to continue building learning experiences that are meaningful to students, connected to their

everyday lives, and encourage authentic engagement with language and culture.

As incredible as the lectures, workshops, and cultural experiences were, the greatest gift this program gave me was the community that developed among the participants. I returned home with new ideas, new teaching resources, and a new perspective on my path forward as an educator, but more importantly, I returned with twenty-five colleagues who have already become an invaluable source of encouragement, collaboration, and friendship. Knowing that I am no longer walking this path alone is perhaps the most meaningful lesson I will carry with me from this experience. For that, I will always be grateful to the Japan Foundation and to the incredible educators who shared this unforgettable journey with me.