2026 Special Training Program for Japanese-Language Teachers Report



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Beyond the Textbook: My Journey of Learning in Japan

As a Japanese language teacher in the United States, I often tell my students that learning a language is much more than memorizing vocabulary and grammar. Language carries the stories, values, and ways of thinking of the people who speak it. During this training program in Japan, I found myself becoming a student again. Each experience reminded me that no matter how long we have been teaching, there is always something new to discover.

One of my first discoveries came from something very simple: walking.

Together with Japanese volunteers, we walked through a local community and created a "Chizu" based on what we observed. As we slowed down, looked carefully, and listened, I began noticing details I might normally have passed without a second thought. Small observations revealed connections between the community, its people, and their everyday lives.



It made me think about my own classroom. We often teach culture through famous places, holidays, and textbook facts, but culture also lives in ordinary streets and daily routines. Sometimes, we simply need to slow down enough to notice it.

This idea of "learning through experience" continued throughout the program.

During our visit to Fujisaki Sobee Shoten, a traditional sake brewery in Saitama, I learned about sake-making and the craftsmanship passed down through generations. I was fascinated by the traditional knowledge and skills of sake-making using koji mold, recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage. Through the sake-pairing experience, I also saw how food, seasons, regional traditions, presentation, and hospitality are interconnected. When we see, taste, and experience culture ourselves, it becomes more than information. It becomes a memory and a story we can share.

Our regional training in Kanazawa and the Noto Peninsula offered another perspective. One of the most meaningful experiences was participating in the Notojima Disaster Learning and Observation Program. Visiting an area affected by the Noto Peninsula earthquake allowed me to see how a natural disaster affects not only buildings and infrastructure, but also people's lives, communities, traditions, and hopes for the future.

What stayed with me most was the resilience of the people and their determination to rebuild. I gained a deeper understanding of the connection between place, community, and recovery. I also realized that there is no single story of "Japan." Every region and community has its own history, challenges, traditions, and stories to tell.

Some of my favorite lessons came from surprisingly simple things.



During our furoshiki experience, I looked at one square piece of cloth and wondered how difficult it could possibly be. I quickly found out. My first attempts did not go quite as planned, but gradually that simple cloth became a bag, a bottle carrier, and other useful forms.

As I practiced, I began to see something deeper: kufū, the creativity to find thoughtful solutions, and mottainai, the idea of valuing what we have and avoiding waste. A single furoshiki can be adapted, reused, and transformed. I immediately thought, "My students need to experience this."

Another humbling moment came during the wadaiko demonstration. I play taiko at my school, although I still have much to learn. Watching skilled performers reminded me that taiko is not simply about striking a drum with strength. The performers listened to one another, coordinated their movements, and created one unified sound.

I became especially aware of ma-the meaningful space between sounds. Sometimes, what we do not play is just as important as what we play. Each person contributes, but no one creates the performance alone. This balance between individual effort and group harmony is something I hope my students can experience, not simply read about.

Our visit to Saitama Municipal Omiya International Secondary School was equally meaningful. Walking through a Japanese school as an American educator allowed me to observe students, teachers, and the learning environment with fresh eyes. I compared what I saw with my own school—not to decide which system was better, but to ask: What can we learn from one another?

The program also allowed me to learn alongside teachers from different countries. Although we teach in different environments, we share many of the same hopes for our students.

For our cultural project, my group chose washoku, Japanese food culture. We wanted students to see that food can tell a much larger story, about seasons, geography, gratitude, aesthetics, family, and community. Instead of simply asking, "What do Japanese people eat?", we began asking deeper questions: What values can we discover through food? How does food reflect culture and community? By the end of the program, I realized that my greatest learning did not come from one lecture or activity. It came from connecting all these experiences.

A piece of cloth taught me about resourcefulness. A drum taught me about harmony. A meal taught me about seasonality and gratitude. A neighborhood walk taught me to notice everyday culture. Notojima taught me about resilience and the strength of community. A school visit encouraged me to reflect on my own teaching.

I returned to the United States with many new lesson ideas, but also with something more important: renewed curiosity.

I am deeply grateful to the Japan Foundation, our instructors, volunteers, program staff, fellow participants, and everyone who welcomed us and generously shared their knowledge, communities, and stories.

When I return to my classroom, I do not want to simply tell my students what I learned in Japan. I want to create opportunities for them to experience, question, compare, and discover for themselves. Perhaps that is the most important lesson I am bringing home: culture is not something we only study. It is something we experience and share and something that teaches us to see the world, and sometimes ourselves, with new eyes.