

*Promoting a Sense of Community in the Japanese as a Foreign Language Classroom  
and Beyond*

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education in Hawaii 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Foreign Language Learning could be lonely tasks, memorizing endless lists of vocabulary, grammar, and sentences. In this post pandemic era, it is extremely important for foreign language learners to feel a sense of community when they learn a foreign language. Building a community and promoting a sense of community is a very important part of the language learning process. There are many benefits of community building in the classroom. Classroom community should be a positive learning environment for students. When students feel comfortable in their classroom environment, they are more likely to take academic risks that are necessary for developing different language skills. Cate Denial, an author of “A Pedagogy of Kindness” (2019) mentions that the importance of the teacher having a mindset of collaboration with students in the classroom. She emphasizes that a teacher needs to be a partner with the students in the learning process. In this paper, I point out the importance of having a sense of community when learning a foreign language. I lay out how I promote a sense of community inside and outside of the classroom with my students who are learning Japanese as a foreign language. As qualitative quotes, I list up students’ comments on their pair work and group work in my classroom from their LERs (Learning Experiences Reflection Report). Their positive comments confirm that building a sense of community inside and outside of the classroom definitely help students improve their foreign language skills.

Keywords: Community Building in the Classroom, Foreign Language Pedagogy, Teaching Experiences, Pedagogy, Practice & Praxis

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## **Introduction**

Foreign Language Learning could be lonely tasks, memorizing endless lists of vocabulary, grammar, and sentences. In this post pandemic era, it is extremely important for foreign language learners to feel a sense of community when they learn a foreign language.

In this presentation, I would like to lay out how I promote a sense of community inside and outside of my Japanese as a foreign language classroom at Wellesley College.

After a long period of time when all the students felt very isolated learning Japanese on Zoom during pandemic, I feel very strongly that building a community and promoting a sense of community with my students in my Japanese classroom is an extremely important part of their language learning process.

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In this paper, I would like to point out the importance of having a sense of community when learning a foreign language. I will lay out how I promote a sense of community inside and outside of the classroom with my students who are learning Japanese as a foreign language.

As qualitative quotes, I list up students’ comments on their pair work and group work in my classroom from their LERs (Learning Experiences Reflection Report). Their positive comments confirm that building a sense of community inside and outside of the classroom definitely help students improve their foreign language skills.

## **Community Building in the Classroom**

There are many benefits of community building in the classroom. Classroom community should be a positive learning environment for students. When students feel safe and comfortable in their classroom environment, they are more likely to take academic risks that are necessary for developing different language skills. In my Japanese classrooms, I often encourage students to work with pairs and sometimes groups. After learning basic grammar and vocabulary in each lesson, my students have a lot of opportunities to practice speaking in class. During their speaking practice (I call it drills) in class, my students work with their neighbors to go through some exercises in Japanese. As for the group work, I assign the students to make a skit as a project for the end of the semester. They work with a group, making a script, making a background pictures and music, and perform a role play in front of the class. It is important to point out that I as a teacher go around the classroom and check in with each pair or group in case they have any questions. This is a non-threatening environment for the students, and they often enjoy finding out about each other.

## **Students’ Comments on LERs (Learning Experiences Reflection Report)**

Here are some of the students’ comments on their pair work and group work in my classroom in their LERs (Learning Experiences Reflection Report) at the end of the semester.

In LERs JPN202-01, JPN202-02, Spring 2023, one student mentioned:

“My partner and I performed a skit in front of the class. Preparing for the oral test with my partner was also a good experience, especially because after the test, my partner explicitly said that it was her best oral test so far. I learned to collaborate with classmates through various activities such as skits, oral tests, and talking to partners during drills.”

Another student mentioned:

“Maeno Sensei has a lot of group/partner work in class, which means everyone in class has interacted with the other at least once. This meant our class soon felt like a large friend group, and I felt very comfortable speaking in Japanese (despite mistakes) or performing a skit in front of everyone. Personally, I am usually very tired in the mornings. But going to Maeno Sensei's class always wakes me up (in a good way) and I always leave feeling more confident in my language abilities.”

In the LERs there is a specific section for Additional Comments as Inclusive Classroom Environment. In that section, one student mentioned:

“In my three years at Wellesley, it has been Maeno-sensei's courses that really make me feel welcome and like we have a close community in the classroom. We do small partner activities most days and Maeno-sensei lets us joke around with each other without letting us get too off-track. I'm not the best at Japanese, but if I stumble, I know someone is always willing to help me without looking down on my mistake.”

Another student commented, “The environment of the class was the best part of the class Maeno-sensei made us all feel like friends and it made going to class exciting.”

As Ideas or Skills Learned in Course, one student mentioned, “I was able to further expand my Japanese language skills and interact with peers while doing so. The cultural lessons also allowed me to become more exposed to the Japanese culture.”

As Course Valuable Features, one student mentioned, “I really liked the skits and presentations that we had to do at the end of semesters. I found it to be a time that not only allowed me to practice my Japanese speaking skills, but also understand my peers better.”

As seen in these students' comments in LERs in Spring 2023, their positive comments confirm that building a sense of community in the classroom definitely help students improve their foreign language skills.

### **Community Building Outside of the Classroom on Campus**

Outside of the classroom, I encourage students to go to the weekly Japan table in a residence hall. It is a lunch table where participants of all levels of Japanese casually talk in Japanese while having lunch. It is hosted by the Japan Club at college. There students can expose to all levels of Japanese, and hopefully feel the sense of Japanese community on campus.

At a residence hall at Wellesley College, there is Japan Corridor, run by a Language Assistant (LA), who is a native speaker of Japanese, and a trained Japanese language teacher. The LA makes plans for the events such as Karaoke, cooking night, movie night, game night, study night, and others. These events are open to Japanese classes as well, and not just for residents

on corridor. The LA also holds office hours in dorm so that students don't have to travel across campus at night. The Japan Corridor is a great residence community on campus, where all the residents have similar interests and goals.

### **Community Building in the Greater Boston Area**

Next, I would like to talk about the Boston Area universities Japanese Speech Event. This event is not a contest in order for people to be friendly to each other among different area universities and colleges. I started 23 years ago to promote a sense of community among Japanese language learners in the Boston Area universities and colleges. The participating universities include Harvard university, Boston University, Boston College, Brandeis University, Northeastern University, UMass Boston, and Wellesley College. In 2023, we started to include poems, skits, videos, and presentations as well. If it is a contest, each college only thinks of winning a contest, therefore for the purpose of friendlier atmosphere, we purposefully made this event to a non-competitive one. After each presentation, anyone can ask a question or give a comment in Japanese. At the end of the event, we always have a reception where all the participants and teachers socialize with each other. Both students and teachers look forward to this event every year.

### **Conclusions**

My students' comments on their pair work and group work in my classroom from their LERs (Learning Experiences Reflection Report) were very positive. Their positive comments confirm that building a sense of community inside and outside of the classroom definitely help students improve their foreign language skills.

What are the benefits of community building in the classroom? Classroom community building creates a positive learning environment for students. When students feel comfortable in their classroom environment, they are more likely to take academic risks, which are necessary for developing language skills including competency and fluency. Competency and resiliency are among the most important factors when the students go out to the real world where they try using their acquired language with the people in the target language communities.

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