

Title

The Role of Community Japanese Classes for Children

– Focusing on a Case Study of a Class and Staff Interviews —

Research Overview

This study examines the role of a community-based Japanese language class for culturally and linguistically diverse children in Japan. Through a one-year case study and volunteer interviews, it explores how the class defines its role as a place where participants feel safe, interact, and learn, and considers implications for sustainability.

Purpose of Study

In Japan, support for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children has long been provided through volunteer-led activities. Although recent government policies have promoted the provision of Japanese-language instruction in public schools, significant gaps persist among local governments and schools (Tajiri, 2025). Consequently, community-based Japanese language classes organized by volunteers continue to play an important supplementary or alternative role for children who require linguistic and social support.

Despite their widespread practice, Japanese language classes for children in community settings are not clearly positioned in educational policy, and their roles are often ambiguously defined (Sagara, 2020; Iino, 2024). Although this lack of formalization creates challenges—such as reliance on volunteers, issues of sustainability, and generational succession—it also allows for

flexible, locally distinctive practices that are difficult to realize in formal school setting (Iino, 2024).

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it aims to clarify how a community-based Japanese language class for children defines its role and implements practices to realize that role. Second, it explores how volunteer staff, particularly younger members, perceive the class, its role, and their own experiences within it. By examining both practices and volunteer perspectives, this study seeks insights into sustainability, generational succession, and the unique value of “community-based” learning spaces distinct from schools.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on one community Japanese language class established in Aichi Prefecture, Japan, in 2025. The class was organized primarily by volunteers and operated under the concept of “safe space, interaction, and learning.” The class was held three times per month at a local community center, targeting elementary and junior high school students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Two types of data were analyzed. First, case study data documented the process from the preparation phase through the first year of operation. These included minutes from preparatory staff meetings, a questionnaire completed by volunteers before the class opened, and 34 meeting minutes recorded before and after each class throughout the year.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight volunteer staff members who had been involved since the class’s establishment. Interview questions addressed motivations for participation, perceptions of classroom characteristics, values emphasized in practices,

challenges faced, personal meanings of participation, and reasons for continuing volunteer activity. Interview recordings were transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed qualitatively.

For analysis, key events and practices were identified chronologically and coded according to the three core concepts: safe space, interaction, and learning. Interview data were analyzed using a thematic categorization method inspired by the KJ Method (Kawakita, 2017), grouping similar statements into categories and examining their conceptual relationships.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the role of the class was actively constructed through dialogue and reflection among volunteers. Questionnaire responses revealed recurrent themes such as “a safe place,” “somewhere everyone feels welcome,” and “a place people want to come back to.” Through discussion, these ideas were consolidated into the core concept of “safe space, interaction, and learning.”

Over the first year, various practices were introduced to realize this concept. Ground rules were created collaboratively with children to ensure psychological safety. Reflection sheets were introduced and gradually refined to support learning while encouraging peer support. Activities focused on emotional expression, self-reflection, and understanding others, addressing social and emotional development as well as language learning.

Collaboration with local residents further expanded the classroom’s role. Community members participated in class activities, allowing children to interact with diverse adults and view themselves as part of the local community. These practices extended the meaning of “safe space, interaction, and learning” beyond the classroom itself.

Volunteer interviews revealed that staff perceived the class as a space distinct from school—less focused on standardized academic outcomes and more on relationships, enjoyment, and mutual learning. “Interaction” emerged as a central element connecting “safe space” and “learning.” Importantly, volunteers described the classroom as a safe space not only for children but also for themselves. Many mentioned enjoyment, personal learning, emotional fulfillment, and relationships among participants as key motivations for continued participation. At the same time, volunteers identified significant challenges, including differences in children’s Japanese proficiency and limited expertise in language teaching. These issues highlight structural limitations inherent to volunteer-run, non-professional settings and underscore the necessity of cooperation with schools, local governments, and specialized institutions.

Key Words

Community-based Japanese language classes; CLD children; Safe space; Interaction, Volunteers

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