

# It's Not Hard . . . Anyone Can Learn Japanese

By Ann McCarthy

Co-Recipient of the 2004 United States-Japan Foundation Elgin Heinz  
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**M**y Japanese 4–5 class, which is combined into one class, was getting ready to leave for a day-trip to a local Japanese garden and restaurant. A student rushed in just as the final bell was ringing, greeting everyone with, “Ohayo gozaimasu (good morning), Hello family.” With that greeting he conveyed what happens in the class. We’re a family, we’re together, you matter to me and I matter to you. This is an example of the magic that can occur in our Japanese classes.

Perhaps one of the best experiences of taking Japanese in high school is not just learning the language and culture of Japan, but the positive learning environment that isn’t always easy in an inner-city public school.

After nineteen years teaching Japanese in the Minneapolis Public Schools, I have determined:

- All students can learn Japanese.
- Do not underestimate the influence you and your students have on each other, nor how important the environment you set is on the learning experience.

### All Students Can Learn Japanese

One of the battles we face as Japanese teachers is the misconception others have of the difficulty of learning Japanese. When I first began teaching Japanese I was surprised to learn that school counselors and others were re-directing low-ability students towards other courses, even when the students were interested in taking Japanese. There was a generalization that Spanish was the easiest language to learn, and one had to be “smart” to learn Japanese.

Through the years I have spent many hours educating counselors, parents, special education teachers, and students that anyone can learn Japanese, and that learning Japanese is no harder than learning any other language. I talk with the ELL (English Language Learners) about Japanese being a good choice for students who struggle with English. I believe this is one key to keeping a Japanese program continuing in a school. Now it is not unusual for special education teachers and counselors at Washburn High School to recommend Japanese as the language to take regardless of ability level. The counselors are great advocates to have in this manner as they convince parents (who are often nervous about their child taking Japanese) that their child will do just fine.

Perhaps the best people to advocate the program and encourage all students to learn Japanese are my current and former students. I always have students at Open House to share their experiences with potential students and their parents.

### Environment: The Kumi Factor

My classroom is arranged in groups of four students, which I call *kumi*. In Japanese elementary schools these groups are called *han*. I prefer calling them *kumi*, because the term has broader implications than *han*. In any case, having my students sit in cooperative groups has been the greatest change in my classroom environment.

The students in each *kumi* are responsible for each other’s learning. When absent, a student gets notes from the *kumi* members. When preparing for tests, *kumi* members are responsible for coaching one another. When doing pair work or games, the students work within their *kumi* groups. While the *kumi* is a cooperative learning situation, most of the time students are given individual grades.

Last year I conducted a student survey about the structure of the *kumi* in my classroom. Some results:

- 100 percent of students thought that working in *kumi* helped them understand information in class better.
- 88 percent said when they were absent it was easy to ask someone in the *kumi* to borrow notes from and ask about the previous day’s work.
- 82 percent said that sitting in the *kumi* structure encouraged them to speak more Japanese in class.
- 97 percent said that their opinions and responses were well-received by members of the *kumi*.
- 75 percent said they did better at taking daily notes working in a *kumi* than they would have on their own.
- 85 percent said they participated more in this class because of the *kumi* structure.

I move the students in the *kumi* groups approximately every three weeks and by the end of the school year students in every class really know each other. In urban settings where our students experience so many transitions and disorder, the *kumi* gives students a chance to get to know people. I truly believe this is one of the reasons students achieve success in my class.

### Kumi Activities

These are some activities that work especially well in *kumi* groups:

#### Card Games

Card games such as “Karuta,” “Slap Jack,” “Uno (Ichi),” and “Go Fish,” work well in the *kumi* groups. Students lose no class time getting into groups; they’re already in groups.

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### Quick Quiz

When students have a bunch of characters or vocabulary to learn, we do a "quick quiz" in a cooperative learning style. For example, if they have fifteen characters to learn, students practice with their kumi members. I then quiz each student in the group on one of the fifteen. Everyone in the group has to get their character right or no one gets credit. It is a pass/fail quiz, usually worth about five points. This encourages students to help each other learn. I give them another chance when they need it.

### Sensei Quiz

This is also a method to review characters, vocabulary, verb conjugations, etc.

Each kumi gets a 3" x 5" index card with vocabulary on it. One person is the *sensei* (teacher) and gives the practice quiz, and corrects it. Then, the group gets a new card and another student becomes the *sensei*. Really, this is just dictation, but because students are teaching students, the kids like it. And, it's an excellent way to review a lot of information.

### Partner Activities

Again, when we are ready to do paired activities, the students are already in groups. There is no disruption or loss of class time.

Some activities we do in pairs are: information gap, battle-ship game, interviews, and pair reading.

In conclusion, I encourage anyone to teach in cooperative groups. It has made my classes better organized, the environment more friendly, and encouraged the students to take responsibility for their learning. It has made a huge difference in their success. The following quote from a former student says it best, "I've enjoyed working in kumis. I feel more comfortable speaking Japanese when it is done constantly within our small groups. It really promotes smarter and meaningful socializing." ■

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