

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Hey everybody. I'm joined today by Tomomi Kakegawa, UW-Eau Claire Professor of Japanese. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

So it would be great if you could first just give us an overview of your linguistic and educational background and maybe how you got to your position at Eau Claire.

Tomomi Kakegawa

Okay so I was born and raised in Japan, and I did all my schooling mostly in Japan. But I studied abroad in Australia when I was in high school, and for 11 months, and then went back to Japan, and did my undergraduate degree in Japan. And I became interested in what actually I became interested in teaching Japanese while I was in Australia. So that's what I studied in, in my undergraduate degree. And after I finished that, I came to the United States to do my graduate study, first in comparative literature, and then I did my PhD in linguistics. And then I got a job here, teaching Japanese. So I started teaching Japanese as a TA, when I was doing my master's in comparative literature. And then I continued teaching throughout my graduate study. And then now I'm here teaching Japanese for the past 17 years. So it's been a long time.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Wow, that's incredible. You have the really unique perspective of being the only faculty member in the Japanese program. So you are the department I would imagine, this gives you a lot of flexibility and opportunity to really get to know your students that kind of plan the sequence of the classes as you like. But also it's a ton of responsibility and pressure on you, I'd imagine. How do you go about developing your courses and you collaborate with other professors at other universities? Or how do you make that easier for you?

Tomomi Kakegawa

Yeah, well, so make it easier. Um, I've been involving my students a lot in my course development. So, um, UW Eau Claire has funding for faculty and student collaborative research. So I've been doing maybe in the past four years, four five years, I'm developing an extensive reading program with my students. So every summer I hire students to do research with me involving extensive reading, so that we can also order books for extensive reading, and my students helped me categorize the books and, you know, collaborate with the library staff to get the books cataloged. And in all those things, if I had to do it alone, I might not do it, but I'm having this project with students, you know, allows me to tackle those problems and you know, curriculum development issues, so that, you know, and I'm also doing this semester, this year, this past academic year, I've had students helped me. We, I guess, evaluate a course. And we, you know, remaking the curriculum for that course. So again, you know, we read the literature on teaching, you know, issues together, and making changes to the cause for the future. So, yeah, I tried to get my students to help.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

That sounds like an incredible opportunity. As somebody who studies second language acquisition specifically, could you describe kind of your philosophy on how languages should be

taught and how you kind of balanced that ideal environment experience with the reality that most your students I would imagine, are picking up Japanese for the first time as 18, 19, 20 year olds, and they're taking other courses and they have jobs, so they can't devote their entire life to learning this language?

Tomomi Kakegawa

Right? So I'm gonna be biased because I'm a linguist. So for me knowing that structure is as important as you know, just being immersed in language or, and, you know, picking up from exposure, because as a second language learner, as an adult second language learner, you can do a lot with conscious learning of the structure and vocabulary. So, I make it very clear to students, you know, and I will start with the very simple structure, you know, but always putting that in context. You know, this is where you will use this, you know, this is what you can do with the structure, but I do focus on the, on the form. And, but I also think it needs to be interesting and fun. So, during class, you know, we do, you know, a lot of activities that, you know, that interest, you know, that could be interesting to students, and fun. So, I think it's balancing that grammar, which students tend to feel, you know, well, you know, I don't know if I like this, but, I think it's important to balance that, you know, approach.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, and I know that I think study abroad is a program that you really encourage students to participate in. And obviously, that hasn't been possible this year. So are there ways that you're trying to replicate some of the experience online? Or is that really possible? How are you helping students take it to that next level?

Tomomi Kakegawa

So luckily, I have a partner in Japan, who teaches at a junior college in Japan, and she teaches courses like teaching Japanese as a foreign language. And so I partner my students with her students. So in the fall semesters, they usually correspond with each other via email. And so even from the first year, like one on one, students will start communicating with the Japanese students. Maybe like, in the fifth week of the semester, after they learn enough to just say, I do, you know, I go shopping, I go, you know, I take classes — that very simple stuff. So, you know, that's a student usually, like, you know, being able to use the language they're using with a native speaker. And this past fall, because of that, COVID, actually, I have this thanks to COVID, I was able to get my students to do zoom meeting, like weekly zoom meeting with her students, because she was teaching a service learning class that usually go in goes into local elementary school to help with that, you know, pupils, but because of the COVID, they couldn't go into school, so they were fine, you know, trying to look for something they can do instead. So they decided to help my students learn Japanese. And yeah, that's how the meeting was set up. So every week, two or three of my students will be in a breakout session with two or three Japanese students. And they will practice Japanese, you know, every week. So that was a very, very nice side effect of COVID.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Yeah, for sure. That sounds like an incredible opportunity. I know that I talked to a couple people online to practice my own language skills, and it's so cool to get to know people around the world and have a native speaker input. So finally, in celebration of multilingualism, can you give me one reason, in Japanese or English or both, whatever you're most comfortable with? Why we should celebrate multilingualism and why it's a good, additive part of someone's identity?

Tomomi Kakegawa

Yeah, well from for me, you know, language kind of forms the way you look at the world. So if you only know Japanese, you're looking at the world through, you know, through the lens of Japanese, but having multiple languages allows you to see that same world with different perspectives. So I think that's, to me, that's the most important thing. And that's why I wanted to learn English so that, you know, I have more access to the world, not just through Japanese. And when I started thinking about teaching Japanese to, you know, outside of Japan, or to people who don't know Japanese it was that, you know, if you expect people to always communicate in English, internationally, you are only including people who know English in that communication. And not everybody succeeds in learning, you know, English, especially, you know, in Japan, you know, it wasn't very common, but I still wanted people to be able to communicate, you know, people from different places to be able to communicate, so, you know, I thought, well, maybe, you know, they could learn Japanese, you know, I can, you know, increase that interaction. So, yeah, that's, that was really important for me.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure. Well, thank you so much for your time. And sounds like you're doing some really cool things and so I'm very excited for all the students who are able to take your class but thank you for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

Tomomi Kakegawa

Of course. Yeah.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Thank you.