

The Sempai Return to School

An interview with Ms Mariko Mizukami, St Andrews College Marayong, NSW

For this issue of Senseis' Voices, we talk with Ms Mariko Mizukami of St Andrews College Marayong in western Sydney. For the last few years, Mizukami sensei has been organizing study tip workshops for her HSC students. Michie Akahane of The Japan Foundation, Sydney interviewed Mariko, her Year 11 students and their Sempai about the program.



St Andrews College Marayong

Q1: When did this program start?

Mariko: I had my first HSC students in 2013. After the exam, I asked the Y12 students to talk about their HSC experience in the Y11 students' class. The students' feedback was great. When the Year 11 students proceeded to Year 12, they asked me to do the same thing for their juniors. So, I started a 'Study Tip Workshop' in 2014 inviting the Y12 students and 2013 graduates to the Y11 class. Since then, the program is held twice a year. Sempai students work hard and assist their juniors. They even prepare study tip and vocab handouts for the juniors!

Q2: Why did you start the workshop?

Mariko: *Firstly, I do not have any experience of the HSC as a student. I think it is most helpful for the HSC students to hear their Sempai's experience about what the HSC is like and how they prepared for it. Secondly, I want to create connections between students beyond their own year level and establish a bond among them even after graduation – in a sense, to create a Japanese community at our school including the graduates.*

Thirdly, hearing Sempai's experiences after graduation can inspire students for their learning of Japanese in the future. It sends a most powerful message to them. The workshops, I thought, also enhance the graduates' motivation to continue their learning of Japanese. Four of my former students went to Japan on exchange programs and that makes my current students inspired. I also organize a gathering, a Japanese students' reunion once a year inviting graduate students. The workshops and reunions create a positive cycle of learning and sharing.

We interviewed current Year 11 students. This is a summary of their remarks.

Q3: What do you find useful and interesting about this workshop?

Students: *We are lucky to have Sempai in our class helping us to learn Japanese effectively. Practical study tips are the most useful ones. It is interesting to know about how to integrate Japanese study into our daily lives, such as translating signs and scenery in town, thinking of words and expressions in Japanese from what we hear as we go about our daily activities, and picking up Japanese while watching anime and TV dramas. Other than study tips, we ask them about their own experience of Japan, such as their culture shock stories in Japan. It is inspiring and encourages us very much.*

A student wrote in a 2016 school newsletter;

"To study a subject like Japanese, it requires perseverance and a passion. When the Senpai visited our class on the day, they kindly provided an insight to their study tips and time management to study HSC Japanese Continuers, but more importantly they revealed the source of their motivation. They gave a different perspective as they said, "To learn a language is like speaking the culture's soul." And with that, inspiration and motivation sprouted within us".

Q4: Do you wish to visit the school for your juniors after graduation?

Students: *Definitely, YES! We want to help our juniors as our Sempai did for us and share our Japanese experience with them.*

Sempai students spoke of their passion about the program and learning Japanese.



Sempai students

Q5: What did you think about the workshops?

Sempai: *It is just awesome. It makes us feel great. We realised that we had so many things to share with our juniors than we had thought we did. It is simply so good to connect in this way.*

Q6: What do you want to convey to your juniors?

Sempai: *Studying for the HSC is hard, but you will realise soon that learning itself is fun if you can make the study fun. We want to help the juniors to make their learning of Japanese enjoyable in any way.*

We also have raised our awareness of culture and inter-cultural aspects through learning Japanese at our school. We want to provide opportunities for our juniors to realise this too.

Last, but not least, learning languages is an important asset for your future. We all have experienced that language learning is advantageous in job hunting because employers seek people with other languages. Language is not only 'convenient' in communicating with people from another culture, but it is essential to engage ourselves more into future society.

Lastly, I asked Ms Mariko Mizukami about difficulties and tasks for the future of this program.

Mariko: I don't see any difficulties in this program. I am always grateful to my graduate students. They are so helpful and positively involved in the workshops. However, arranging meeting times can be an issue. Graduate students are constantly busy with both jobs and university assignments. I start contacting them more than 1 month before the workshops so that they can easily arrange time for the workshops. I sometimes set the time after school, if it is not possible to make it in normal class hours. It is my pleasure to make both of my past and present students happy through the workshops.

Interviewed in October, 2017