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# JAPANESE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: LEARNING ABOUT THE TOHOKU DISASTER TO CONNECT JAPANESE LANGUAGE LEARNING TO THE REAL WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

It is important for Japanese learning to be a meaningful part of students' school studies. This can be achieved by designing lessons that make Japanese learning more purposeful, intercultural and engaging, connecting students with real people, real Japanese society, and the real world. This chapter discusses two different projects that are associated with the context of the 2011 disaster to engage and motivate students in their Japanese studies by providing opportunities for them to see the purpose of their language learning and interact with the real world. The Koala Project engaged students with the real-life stories of the people linked with the Tohoku earthquake and developed students' intercultural capabilities as they communicated with students from Fukushima. The cross curricular lessons motivated students by highlighting the relevance of Japanese language by connecting it to the Geography curriculum.

## INTRODUCTION

The Koala Project, designed and started by Hiroko Koga and continued by Maya Asano, engaged students with the real-life stories of the people linked with the Tohoku Earthquake and developed students' intercultural capabilities, whilst stimulating their ongoing interest and demand for purposeful Japanese. Below, two cross curricular Japanese language lessons, themed on natural disasters and the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, will be explained. These lessons were developed to combine the Geography curriculum with Japanese; in them, students learned about the causes and effects of earthquakes and tsunami, with a focus on how they affect the lives of the people of Tohoku, and how they were supported after the disaster through many creative community events and projects.

## THE KOALA PROJECT

### BACKGROUND

In March 2013, two years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, Year 9 students at Perth Modern School studied the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and still-unfolding Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster. The students had strong emotional reactions to what they learned, and in response many of them wondered if there was something they could do, even if it was something small to start with. A Year 9 Japanese class came up with the idea of making one thousand origami koalas to carry their messages of goodwill to children in Fukushima. The idea was based on the story "Sadako and the One Thousand Cranes" and the recent Japanese trend of using koalas as good luck charms (as supposedly they never *おちる ochiru*, fall – or fail). Noticing that many of the students had little opportunity to use Japanese beyond the classroom, we saw this as a perfect opportunity to create an authentic learning context that would give students a greater sense of using Japanese for real-life purposes by interacting more with the society around them, including with local community members and students in Fukushima, Japan.

### THE KOALA PROJECT 2013

The Koala Project aimed to develop students' intercultural capability at a deeper level, by helping students realise the power of language in connecting heart and soul. The activities that comprised the Koala Project were designed to create as many opportunities as possible for students to:

- engage with true stories of people linked with the Great East Japan Earthquake;
- make connections and interact with Japanese-speaking people beyond the classroom;
- reflect on their own feelings and experience in response to others, and;
- stimulate their ongoing interest in and demand for purposeful learning of language that can be used in real life, not just in the context of their language lessons at school.

Through this project, the students were expected to accomplish the following in Japanese:

- communicate with a Japanese guest speaker from Fukushima;
- write their own messages to present to students in Fukushima; and
- perform a Japanese-language song in collaboration with other students.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

	Lesson	Content	Target	Time
1	"Children of the Tsunami" [1] & Watashi no kimochi	Watch the BBC documentary video <i>Children of the Tsunami</i> to learn what is happening in Fukushima after the earthquake. Students reflect on how they feel about the situation using "Watashi no kimochi" worksheet.	Y8 - 12	1 lesson (40min)
2	Origami Koala Making	Learn how to make origami koala.	Y8 - 12	1 lesson
3	"Light Up Nippon" [2]	Watch the documentary film "Light Up Nippon" to understand the importance of supporting / caring for /encouraging the people of Tohoku mentally.	Y11,12	2 lessons
4	Guest Speaker Session "My beautiful hometown, Fukushima" & "Ganbappe, Fukushima"	Listen to two guest speakers tell their personal Fukushima story: 1. Akiko Stockton, a member of the Japanese community in Perth, whose family and hometown were affected by the disaster. 2. Caitlin Lee, an ex Fukushima JET who experienced the disaster and ongoing restoration.	Y8 - 11	2 lessons
5	The power of words (Message for Fukushima)	Feel/ be aware of the power of words by reflecting on own experience and reading poetry written by 15-year-old Japanese student from Fukushima.[3] Then, write a message for Japanese students in Fukushima.	Y8 - 10	2-3 lessons
6	Song for Fukushima ("I love you & I need you, Fukushima")	Sing the song "I love you & I need you ふくしま", plan some choreography and create a video.	Y8 - 12	1 lesson for practice and 2 lessons for shooting
7	One Thousand Origami Koalas	Fold and stick one thousand origami koalas on paper to form a shape of Fukushima.	Y8 - 12	throughout the project

A total of one hundred Japanese language students at Perth Modern participated in the project. By the end of Term 3, 2013, students had completed folding the one thousand origami koalas, writing messages, and filming their collaborative song performance. In October 2013, the origami koalas and students' messages were delivered to Fukushima by Akiko Stockton, a Western Australian representative of the Association of People from Fukushima Prefecture. On behalf of the students at Perth Modern School, this special gift was formally presented to Xaverio Gakuen, a school in Fukushima, by *Breath*, a musical trio consisting of prominent musicians including Australian *shakuhachi* player Anne Norman. The gift was well received, with the event even making the local Fukushima television news.

## PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

It is very difficult to organise a project such as this alone, so when planning we had to consider how to source the required resources. We made ongoing efforts to expand our connections with Japanese community organisations and key personnel throughout the project. This spread word of the project, helping any interested parties to become involved; it also helped us to utilise the resources of the wider community. For example:

- two guest speakers were invited from the local community to deliver a presentation, which proved to be an invaluable opportunity to stir, stimulate and inspire the students to action;
- through the personal contacts of one of the guest speakers, a suitable sister school in Fukushima was identified;
- origami paper was donated by the Consulate-General of Japan in Perth, The Japan Foundation, Sydney, and other interested individuals.



## THE KOALA PROJECT 2014

After receiving their special gift, the students in Fukushima worked on writing replies in English and/or Japanese (depending on student level), and these were delivered to Perth Modern School in February 2014. Then, as a part of Language Week, Year 9 students completed the following activities:

### *Koala Project reflection*

In small groups, students discussed their participation in the Koala Project 2013. They reflected on what they had learnt and how they felt during and after the project. Most remembered the activities well and these examples of their feedback demonstrate the positive emotions the project generated:

"We wanted to convey our feelings to the students and people who went through this tough time. We love Fukushima"; and "I felt that we actually made a difference to the children affected by the tsunami."

### *Xaverio Gakuen letter reading*

The students were asked to read and analyse the letters to find out about the writer's thoughts and personality. This activity was supported by a worksheet that prompted the students to examine not just the meaning of the words written but also the design and physical appearance of the letter (as some of the Japanese students had chosen to draw pictures and decorate their letters).

### *Xaverio Gakuen letter discussion*

After reading the letters, students discussed them, first in a small group and then as a whole class.

### *The future of the Koala Project discussion*

After reflecting on the previous year's project, and the impact it had on both themselves and the students at Xaverio Gakuen, students considered how they could develop the relationship and continue the Koala Project. They generated some interesting ideas, such as a workshop to raise public awareness of the Fukushima disaster in Perth by sharing the Koala Project with others, and organising a video chat with the students of Xaverio Gakuen for cultural and language exchange.

## PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

In order to implement the Koala Project 2014 effectively, there were many aspects that needed consideration:

### *Choosing the target group*

There were many Perth Modern students who were partially involved in the original Koala Project, but for these activities we selected the Year 9 students who had been actively involved. Some students such as those in Year 11 and 12 were interested, but unable to participate.

### *Deciding the purpose of the lesson*

As the primary purpose of the project was to foster friendship between the two schools, we designed the activities so they were focused on more than just reading the letters as practice in Japanese comprehension. The real purpose of these activities was to encourage student reflection on what they had achieved so far and the impact of their actions, as well as for the students to consider how to continue contributing to Japanese society through the Koala Project in the future.

### *Preparing lesson materials*

For effective language learning, it is important to carefully consider choice and preparation of teaching materials. For the Language Week activities, the Xaverio letters were the core teaching material. As the letters included authentic Japanese, including vocabulary and grammar that students may not know, it was identified that students may struggle with comprehension if they were to read the letters individually, and would then be unable to discuss them. Thus, we provided four Japanese letters and two English letters to small groups of four to five students, and encouraged them to cooperate to read two Japanese letters and one English letter per person in one group. During the activity, student learning was supported by the provision of dictionaries and with assistance from Japanese ALTs; for an activity like this, support from native Japanese speakers helps with working out expressions that may not be in the dictionary.

## BENEFITS

The Project provided students with the opportunity to use their Japanese beyond the classroom. This leads them to find new purpose and meaning behind their language learning as they are able to apply their knowledge in real-life contexts. Students were motivated to write their letters to the Japanese students and were even more motivated to read their replies. They were able to learn some new expressions in Japanese as well as various kanji. They were proud of themselves when they could understand the meaning of words and phrases, but more importantly they valued their ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of the students in Fukushima. The students were able to develop their intercultural understanding as they tried to understand the situation of the students in Xaverio Gakuen from the letters, and this prompted them to think about what kind of support would be best to provide next. Both schools are committed to ensuring ongoing communication and educational exchange for the mutual benefit of their students.

Moreover, the students' motivation to study Japanese has significantly improved, as they feel that they can now learn Japanese with authentic materials, such as the letters they received. Even though there are some native Japanese speakers at Perth Modern School, students have had limited opportunities to communicate with Japanese people in Japan. The Project highlighted to students that even at their Japanese level, they can still communicate meaningfully with Japanese people in Japan. The students also felt proud of their achievements and happy when they received the letters from Xaverio. When students received letters in English, they felt particularly special (and could understand how the Japanese students felt when receiving a letter in their native language from a non-native speaker.). Projects such as this are some of the ways in which teachers can connect their students with Japanese people and society in real-life contexts.

## ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There were a number of issues faced during the Koala Project. One unexpected issue was the need to work out the best way of distributing the Xaverio Gakuen letters, as some of the letters were addressed to particular students, but others (mostly those written in Japanese) were addressed to the school in general. Furthermore, some students received personal replies from multiple Xaverio students, but other students received no personal reply. After several meetings between the Japanese teachers, ALTs and Hiroko Koga, it was decided to explain the situation truthfully to the students. The personal replies were given to the addressed students and the letters addressed to Perth Modern were used in the lesson. The reasoning behind this decision was that we felt it was important to demonstrate to the students that they could trust their teachers. Furthermore, by using the letters addressed to Perth Modern in class, it was made equitable for all students. We recommend that, when starting this kind of relationship, there is regular communication between the teachers of each school to ensure, among other things, that the aims of both schools are met. If this communication had taken place, we possibly could have requested a personally addressed letter for each student.

Another issue that arose was how to continue the communication between the two schools. In order to foster the friendship, it is important for students to communicate. After communicating via letters, both Perth Modern School and Xaverio Gakuen students have expressed their desire to start communicating via video chat. However, as there are restrictions on using the WA Department of Education internet network for video chat, we are investigating possible use of an external network and hope that we will be able to organise a video chat in the near future.

## CROSS CURRICULAR LESSONS

### BACKGROUND

After the Koala Project, and seeing the impact it had on students, we wanted to explore other ways that we could learn more from the March 11 disaster in our Japanese language lessons. We originally considered an all day workshop, but after some discussion we decided to create shorter cross curricular lessons that could be taught by anyone. The nature of the March 11 disaster means that the topic suits both the Science and Geography curricula; as we wanted to focus on the human impact of the disaster, we chose to use the Geography curriculum. These lessons are designed to show that it is not necessary to create long-term projects, but that it is possible to create shorter lessons to educate students about aspects of the disaster whilst providing them with opportunities to develop their language abilities at the same time.

Lesson One was trialled at All Saints, a private Anglican College, in one Year 7 Japanese class and one Year 8 Japanese class. Lesson Two was trialled at Perth Modern School in a Year 9 Japanese class. Whilst the students of Perth Modern school had been involved in the Koala Project, the students at All Saints did not have the same level of prior knowledge and knew very little about the Tohoku disaster.

## LESSON OVERVIEWS

	<b>Lesson One: How to prepare for natural disasters</b>	<b>Lesson Two: How people help after natural disasters</b>
<b>Learning area goals Australian Curriculum Geography</b>	<p><b>Year 7:</b> The causes, impacts and responses to an atmospheric or hydrological hazard (ACHGK042)</p> <p><b>Year 8:</b> The causes, impacts and responses to a geomorphological hazard (ACHGK053)</p>	<p><b>Year 7:</b> The causes, impacts and responses to an atmospheric or hydrological hazard (ACHGK042)</p> <p><b>Year 8:</b> The causes, impacts and responses to a geomorphological hazard (ACHGK053) (Year 8)</p>
<b>Specific Learning Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain what people should do to prepare for tsunami and earthquakes</li> <li>• Use the grammar point ましょう to suggest what to do in emergency situations</li> <li>• Respond to ~ましょうか? questions appropriately</li> <li>• List (in Japanese) and justify (in English or simple Japanese if possible) what should be included in an emergency backpack</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the different kinds of aid that can be provided</li> <li>• Read Japanese event posters</li> <li>• Create their own Japanese language event poster.</li> </ul>
<b>Intro</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Think Pair Share</b> about March 11, 2011.</li> <li>• <b>Introduce “My Fukushima Story”</b> using photos.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Think Pair Share</b> about March 11, 2011.</li> <li>• <b>Introduce “My Fukushima Story”</b> using photos</li> </ul>
<b>Body</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“How to prepare” PowerPoint</b> (explicit language instruction). The different ways to prepare for a tsunami were explained, and how to say them in Japanese introduced. PowerPoint with images and example sentences provided visual support. Students practised the target grammar by completing worksheet questions.</li> <li>• <b>“Gokiburi” evolution game</b> (Verbal practice). Students pair up to practise the target language. Janken winner evolves to the next animal.</li> <li>• <b>“What goes in an emergency backpack” value line activity</b> (verbal practice). Students practise the answering ましょうか? format questions by answering questions about what to include in an emergency backpack.</li> <li>• <b>Draw your emergency backpack</b> (writing practice). Students draw their emergency backpack. All objects included in the backpack must be labelled in Japanese.</li> <li>• (Due to lack of time this activity was not completed in trial lesson.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Snowball activity</b> (pre-language activity). Small groups each received a piece of paper labelled with a different kind of aid. Groups recorded their thoughts on the pros and cons of that kind of aid on the paper and then passed it to the next group. Subsequent group indicated if they agreed (tick) or disagreed (cross, with reasoning explained) with other group’s points. Students then discussed whether one kind of aid was better than another.</li> <li>• <b>Reading event posters</b> (reading/verbal practice) Small groups each received two authentic Japanese language charity event posters and were tasked to work out the event details.</li> <li>• <b>Worksheet and PowerPoint quiz</b> (explicit language instructions) Event poster vocabulary was explained and practised via short worksheet activities and a quiz.</li> <li>• <b>Event/Poster designing</b> (verbal/writing practice) Small groups were tasked with designing a charity event and poster.</li> </ul>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflection</li> <li>• Students suggest how to prepare in Japanese</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflection</li> <li>• Quiz students about their posters in Japanese</li> </ul>

## PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

There were two main considerations when designing the lessons: ensuring that they were relevant to the students (that they could see the purpose of the lesson and find it useful); and ensuring that students were motivated to complete the activities and learn the language. Please note, the table above shows the relevant curriculum sections for Years 7-8 for Lesson Two. There is no relevant section of the Year 9 Geography curriculum that can be directly linked to the topic, but the lesson was trialled in this class as they had been involved with the Koala Project and it was not possible to run it in a lower level class at the time.

### *Relevancy*

From the very beginning, relevancy was the main focus of the lesson design, informing everything from the choice of vocabulary and grammar to activity design. In Lesson One the specific topic and vocabulary (on disaster preparation) were selected to help students consider the lifelong impact that living in a disaster-prone area can have. Many students have not thought about how residents in countries such as Japan must be prepared to leave within minutes if a tsunami or earthquake warning is heard, and that the contents of one emergency backpack might be all they have left after a disaster. The way that people prepare for disasters is both an impact of, and response to the disaster. In Lesson Two, the vocabulary we chose to focus on (e.g. 場所, 無料, 日時) are words actually used on Japanese-language event posters. We provided groups of students with the same two posters (advertising charity events that were run in Fukushima) and tasked them with working out the details of the event. The students enjoyed and performed well in this activity, as they were able to use contextual clues and their existing Japanese knowledge to work out the meaning, with scaffolding provided by the teacher.

Later in Lesson Two, the relevancy of the topic and language was further highlighted through the poster designing task. We asked small groups of students to design an event that would generate a kind of aid (motivational support, volunteering, money etc.) for Fukushima. To provide a realistic context for the use of Japanese, we explained that their event would be aimed at other students of Japanese and the Japanese community in Perth. To further challenge the students (and provide an even more realistic context) the event had to be something they could potentially organise. Students first had to discuss their event, before recording the details in Japanese and English and finally designing the poster. The previous discussion on the pros and cons of the different kinds of aid informed student discussion, with students thinking very realistically. Most groups came up with excellent and plausible ideas, such as a letter-writing stall at the Japan Festival Perth, or a Japanese-style festival held on the school grounds. Some students even decided to design dual language posters, to appeal to a wider audience and thus generate more aid.

### *Motivation*

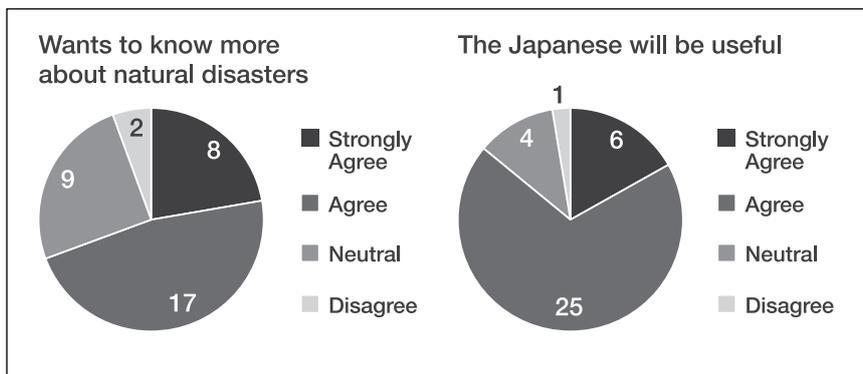
For Lesson One, it was challenging to design tasks that were relevant. Students were able to make the connection between the geography context and the language used (as by using the vocabulary and target grammar students were expressing ways to prepare), and thus saw how it could be relevant, but it was difficult to design an activity where students could practise the language in a realistic context.

If you cannot design an activity to highlight the relevance of the topic and skills, then you must ensure that you provide some other form of motivation. This is why for Lesson One we provided motivation for verbal practice in the form of the Gokiburi evolution game. Students enjoy and are motivated to play this game as, although it is competitive (students are racing to be the first to evolve from a cockroach into a human), the winner is decided by *janken* rather than student ability. Students must walk around and practise with different people, and no one student is ever in the spotlight (as all students are playing at once) so the game provides a motivating, safe, and supportive environment for students to practise in.

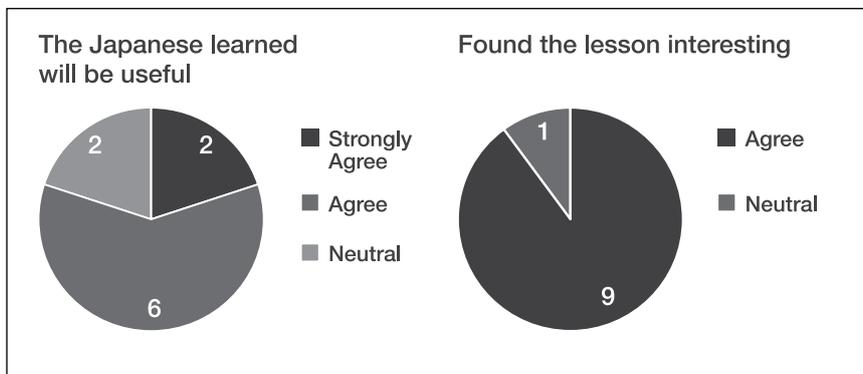
We also focussed on student motivation to use not only the language but also their knowledge of the Geography topic by providing opportunities for the students to provide their opinion. For example, in Lesson One's "What goes in an emergency backpack" value line activity, students expressed their opinions regarding whether an item should be included in an emergency backpack. Students were required to stand along a line in a position determined by what they thought (one end yes, the other no, the middle being undecided). Students were then questioned "ひじょうぶくろに [name of item] をいれましようか?", with students answering either "はい、いれましよう" or "いえ、いれません". Student then justified their opinion, and could do so in English, or in Japanese if appropriate. This activity also helped the students to connect the grammar to a real life usage, as they were able to use it to verbalise their opinion, even if this is not the most authentic context for using the language.

## BENEFITS

Lessons of this kind are very beneficial as they help students to see the usefulness of the language they are learning, thus motivating students and generating interest in both the language and the topic. As you can see from the student feedback provided below, most students indicated that they found the Japanese useful. The students also enjoyed participating in the lesson, with comments indicating that they found the opportunities to provide their own opinion, and the games, the most enjoyable aspects of the lessons. One interesting aspect of the feedback we received was how much interest in the topic the lessons generated. As they had not previously studied the disaster, we asked the All Saints students to respond to the statement “I want to know more about natural disasters”, and received a positive response (as shown below). Even the Perth Modern students, who had previously studied the topic, indicated that they found it interesting. This shows that there is a potential to collaborate with other teachers to use lessons such as these as part of cross-curricular modules of work. Earthquakes and tsunami are both featured in the Geography and Science curriculum, so once student interest is sparked they could continue to study these topics within those learning areas, and potentially others as well. There is even the potential to extend Lesson Two further, and have students actually run one of the student-created events.



Student Feedback: Lesson One



Student Feedback: Lesson Two

## ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main issue experienced when designing the lessons was ensuring that the Japanese chosen was as relevant as possible, whilst still being of an appropriate level and covered in the curriculum. Originally, we had discussed designing Lesson One around the grammar point “べき”, with the students explaining how to prepare for a tsunami (e.g. You should put water in your emergency backpack); however, as this is not in the curriculum, and may have been too advanced for the students, it was decided to use ~ましよう and provide the context of suggesting what to do (e.g. let’s go to the evacuation centre), as this is useful language for students to know and, whilst not being 100% authentic, is still a plausible choice of language for the context.

Secondly, due to scheduling limitations, there was not enough time to fully cover the content, or for the students to finish the final activities. Many students provided feedback stating they would have preferred more time. We therefore recommend that the activities and content be covered over multiple sessions.

Finally, to introduce each lesson Caitlin Lee told her Fukushima story, accompanied by personal photos. Having someone tell a personal story is an excellent way to hook students as it connects them to real situations and real people. You can contact your local Japanese Consulate to see if there are any members of the Japanese community or former JETs who experienced the disaster and would be willing to share their story, though this may not always be possible. Alternatives include videos, news articles, picture books and stories.

## CONCLUSION

These learning experiences and activities were designed with the intention of making Japanese a meaningful and relevant part of students' studies. The Koala Project provided students with the opportunity to use their Japanese "beyond the classroom" in an authentic context, first by writing to the students at Xaverio Gakuen, and then by reading the replies. The students were proud that they could use their language skills to communicate with Japanese students. The Project also helped to motivate students and engage them in Japanese language learning by creating a real connection between the students and the Japanese community. Students were keen to understand what the Xaverio students had said and, now that they know they can understand authentic materials, they have more confidence in their abilities. It is also possible to create the same kind of engaging learning experience on a smaller scale, and the cross-curricular lessons discussed provide an example of incorporating the topic of the Tohoku disaster into the Geography and Japanese curricula. Even these short lessons can improve student engagement and motivation and assist them to see the relevance and purpose of their language learning. Finally, we feel that it is important for students of Japanese to have an understanding of the Tohoku disaster, as the event will continue to impact Japanese society for a long time.

## RESOURCES

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*Children of the Tsunami* (2012) ©Renegade Pictures, UK is a documentary film which describes the situation in Fukushima after the Tohoku Earthquake through the eyes of the children.

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*LIGHT UP NIPPON* (2012) ©2012 LIGHT UP NIPPON PARTNERS is a documentary film made by LIGHT UP NIPPON Executive Committee in collaboration with the Japan Foundation; it featured challenges by the young Japanese people supporting Tohoku's recovery.

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The poetry is on the website "Click Nippon" organised by the Japan Forum (<http://www.tjf.or.jp/clicknippon/ja/mywayyourway/02/post-3.php>)

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For lesson plans, worksheets, activity explanations and other additional resources, please access the following dropbox link. <http://tinyurl.com/pm24nug>