I devote a lot of time to teaching Japanese. Learning a foreign language requires an amazing amount of energy, patience, and effort. Having learned English as a second language myself, I know how difficult it is for native English speakers to learn Japanese because of the vast differences in the two languages. Learners often feel too overwhelmed to continue. However, I also know how liberated you feel and how much your current and future horizons are broadened when you master a second language.

For every Japanese class I organize language materials into bite-sized pieces, present them carefully and clearly. I aim at creating systematic practice not only for a class period, a week, or even a semester, but for the entire time a student studies Japanese at Colgate. It is pedagogically and intellectually challenging to organize thousands of words, 2000 kanji characters, and hundreds of grammatical points into learnable pieces, while simultaneously keeping track of what students do and do not know, and of which grammar items are harder than others. This is not enough, however. The language teacher’s job, I believe, is to be a performer who can stimulate real communication with students in the target language.

The more I teach, the more I feel that teaching a language is like being a duck. I compare myself to a duck cruising elegantly on the surface of a pond, while underneath my two hard-paddling legs enable me to move quickly and shift directions at will. I want to enable my students to cruise along with me, and to feel the excitement, joy, and adventure of learning a new language and culture. For every class period, I plan thoroughly in order to provide specific situations in which students are likely to use the Japanese vocabulary and grammar they have been introduced to previously. I try to have natural conversations with students, using very specific grammar and vocabulary that need to be reviewed. Every word and grammar point I use in Japanese is planned ahead of time, but I speak as if I am spontaneously talking with the students and enjoying the conversations.

In the classroom, what observers see on the surface might be a teacher having a light-hearted conversation with her students. However, my role beneath the
surface is to enable efficient learning, steering the conversation and activities by having carefully prepared beforehand.

I also keep in mind that from the language learner’s point of view, language is a vehicle for communication, and not a catalog of curious facts to be referred to only occasionally, as it might be for a linguist. I tell students to always be actively thinking about what they can and want to say in Japanese. To this end, I try to provide students with a motivation for every utterance they speak. I try to make the classes fun not because I want to be a popular teacher, but because I want the students to have a desire to speak, listen, seek information from others, and engage in real communication with the people around them using Japanese! My hope is that students enjoy communicating with the new language, and that, by the time they finish our Japanese language courses, they are sufficiently able and comfortable to use Japanese without a teacher’s support.