

An Interview with Former NASILP Executive Director, Koji Arizumi

Koji Arizumi, DMA, served as the Executive Director of NASILP from 2015 until 2024. He recently retired from the University of Alabama where he taught Japanese in the Department of Modern Languages and Classics and directed the Critical Languages Center. Below, Dr. Arizumi reflects on his history of teaching and service.



Photo credit: University of Alabama

By: Heather A. West, Samford University

How did you come to study flute at the University of Alabama in 1990?

While I was an engineering (applied physics) major in Japan, I joined a Latin (mainly bossa nova) music group with my friends and played percussion and flute. I enjoyed playing music so much that I changed my major to music and began studying English language and music theory at Western Illinois University, and later at The Florida State University where I also met my American wife Laurie who was also a music major. We got married in Tallahassee, and then had a baby. This was a big move for me that changed my whole life. To pay for our new daughter and our college degrees, I worked as a sushi chef and then as a Japanese GTA. Eventually I decided to go for a Doctorate

in Flute Performance (DMA), and was recommended to study with Dr. Sheryl Cohen at the University of Alabama.

How did that experience segue into teaching Japanese at UA?

Since I had experience teaching Japanese at FSU, it wasn't too hard to get work as a Japanese teacher at UA, too. In the early 90's Japanese language education was not quite developed, and many universities needed Japanese teachers. UA's Center for Communication and Educational Technology was offering Japanese instruction via live satellite to high schools all over the United States. Laurie started working for CCET in curriculum development, and moved up to team-teach on the air with Dr. Sukero Ito. When he went back to Japan to teach at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, I took over his position and Laurie and I team-taught Japanese. When the satellite used to deliver the program through the Center for Public Television went out of orbit (how often does that happen I wonder?) we switched to pre-recorded VHS tape delivery and telephone tutoring. In 2002 we switched the Japanese distance learning program over to online format, which was a huge advance in technology at the time. This prompted my interest in computer-assisted language learning and I went to every conference I could, and Laurie and I became experts and guest lecturers for innovative educational technology for foreign language educators.

When and under what circumstances were you tapped to serve as the director of UA's Critical Languages Center?

The CLC was established by Dr. Ron Robel, who was also an early president of NASILP. He developed Japanese and Chinese courses at UA, and expanded the CLC to include some other languages using the NASILP system. After he retired, a new director was assigned, but that person was overwhelmed and quit within a year. I was acting as interim director, and then was voted in as formal director of the CLC and taught intermediate and advanced Japanese in the Modern Languages and Classics department.

Which innovations, pedagogical or administrative, are you most proud of implementing at UA?

With my long experience of teaching via distance -- from the old live TV and telephone tutoring and mailing VHS tapes age to modern online delivery and Zoom --, I can clearly see the effect different modes of curriculum delivery can have on students. While learning and working with computer-enhanced language teaching I tried to expand the

technology for many languages in the CLC. We made online Japanese, online Chinese, online Arabic, and then online Korean. All of these programs were way ahead in innovations compared to other universities. Pedagogically, I think I tried to steer NASILP away from the old language lab + audio-lingual teaching method to a more context-driven communicative approach using native speakers rather than cassette tapes. Also, I created new classes for various languages including Nahuatl, Cherokee, Twi/Akan, Farsi and ASL.

When did you join NASILP and when did you start serving on its board of directors? What did you enjoy most about that work?

I became executive director of NASILP in 2015. I noticed the financial situation of NASILP from information provided that led me to change the conference venue from the usual expensive hotel (Crystal City Hilton in Arlington, VA) to member university campuses instead [starting in 2017] when I became the executive director. I also helped many universities that were thinking of trying the self-instructional approach with native tutors (who we call “language trainers”). Those kinds of changes that benefit students, universities and the NASILP organization itself are what I enjoy most.

In addition to serving on the NASILP board, you also worked as an external examiner for some universities. How long did you have that role and with how many universities did you work?

I did this for so many years I can't remember all the places I traveled to until Skype was invented! The ones I remember most are the University of South Alabama, University of North Alabama, University of Kentucky, Berea College (in KY), University of Alabama-Birmingham, Samford University, Davidson College, and there are probably more. I also provided consultation services to many universities including non-member institutions.

During your tenure as executive director of NASILP, what would you consider your most significant accomplishment or initiative that had lasting impact on the organization?

I think I influenced more technology use for the member institutions. NASILP classes pretty much depended on teaching using tapes or old videos for a long time. This fostered the audio-lingual method that relies on oral-aural skills, a lot of rote learning and drills, listening and repeating. The concept needed to change to incorporate culture and real-life language skills including learning the various written languages for our classes of Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Hindi etc. I also had to create a new website for NASILP which was old, too.

As for the administrative aspect, the biggest impact may be helping with the financial stability of the organization, which strangely, is my least talented part. I don't think NASILP would have survived if we had kept using that hotel in Washington, DC that was ridiculously expensive. [...]

How did you see the field of language teaching evolve during your time in leadership both at UA and in NASILP?

Self-instructional language learning changed greatly from its roots in the audio-lingual method era using tapes for rote drill exercises, to the modern [pedagogy with] a contextualized, communicative approach using interactive technology. Even though this evolution has greatly improved students' learning outcomes, and has made them better global citizens, it is still hard to persuade administrators (and even language teachers) who can [...] stay fossilized using the old conventional teaching methods. This aggravates me to no end.

What was the most challenging period you navigated as executive director, and how did you guide the organization through it?

The most challenging time I had to deal with was when Dr. Alex Dunkel retired, and all the secretariat staff were in Arizona. I am the only one out of Arizona, and they were all set in their old ways of doing things. Then suddenly the secretary and web developer retired, and we lost the person who had all the information for our bank. It was a huge mess! I had to remake the website from scratch by myself, change the bank information, and more. I am glad that's over.

How did you work to ensure that NASILP remained relevant and responsive to the changing needs of language educators and program directors?

As AI and translation apps continue to develop at a rapid pace, I believe NASILP must focus on a human-based approach that stresses language as culture and human relations and connections over language fluency alone, with the purpose to understand people (not only languages) and to encourage our students to think for themselves rather than relying on ChatGPT and social media influencers. If we don't do this, the future of both students and language teaching is doomed.

Looking at the current landscape of language education, what advice would you give to the organization's members as they face emerging challenges and opportunities?

The keyword to remember is "flexibility." I have seen many universities go in the direction of a money-making business system and students are seen as only dollar signs. Since NASILP is a rather small and flexible organization, NASILP can help to ensure that each student receives a personalized experience by having a choice of many languages, even if class size will potentially be very small. The biggest crime a university can do to students is try and force them into big classes of limited number of languages where an instructor cannot give individual attention. NASILP will be a great hope for students in the US who are eager to learn rare languages.

As you reflect on your years of service, what do you hope will be your legacy with NASILP, and what are you most excited about for its future?

Technology is convenient, and AI can do (or mimic?) many things a human can do regarding the teaching of languages, however, I feel something extremely significant is missing. I hope NASILP will continue my mission to seek and find a way to keep the human factor in education for students learning new and vastly different languages and cultures. What makes me happy and excited is to see our students interact with their native-speaking language trainers to the extent that they want to travel or even live in the country where their trainer comes from. The language trainers also meet with students outside of class in club and special events that our university hosts to teach culture and togetherness. The trainers also have a very special experience as well and [gain] a better understanding of American culture. This is why I changed the term from "tutor" to "language trainer" because they are much more like guides and mentors than what someone would think of as a traditional tutor. I hope we can continue the system with these valuable people who are not education degreed "teachers" but can be so much more valuable to our students than a tenured Professor who cannot relate to young students. As long as we train them well, personality and work ethic and dedication are so much more important than paper degrees.