

## An Interview with Ayako Smethurst

Executive Director of Kizuna Across Cultures

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### Global Classmates Builds Bridges Between Japanese and American Youth

Global Classmates is an online cultural and language exchange program that connects high school students in Japan and the United States. The program is administered by Kizuna Across Cultures (KAC), a non-profit co-founded by Ayako Smethurst, who also serves as its Executive Director. Under her leadership, Global Classmates nurtures globally-minded youth through bilingual dialogue and cross-cultural collaboration. In this article, Ayako reflects on the program's mission, origins and growth, joined by insights from teachers and students who have taken part.

Interview by Louise George Kittaka\*



Ayako Smethurst, Executive Director of Kizuna Across Cultures

Ayako Smethurst grew up in Ashiya, a residential city between Kobe and Osaka, and had formative overseas exchange experiences that set her on a path toward intercultural relations. After earning a degree in International Relations from Kyoto's Ritsumeikan University, she worked in HR at Procter & Gamble's Kobe headquarters.

"There were employees from other countries who spoke great English, and I was very impressed by how good they were at promoting their achievements while staying humble," she recalls. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, this is the global standard.' And I realized it's not just about English—it's also about communication skills. That's what Japanese people really need in order to make the most of our strengths in a global setting."

Following her marriage to a U.S. national, Ayako moved to Washington, D.C., in 2007, where she served as a Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program Coordinator at the Embassy of Japan. The JET Program, run under the auspices of the Japanese government in collaboration with local authorities, brings college graduates to Japan to take part in foreign language education and international exchange initiatives.

### ***A Grassroots Approach to Globalism***

On March 11, 2011 the Great East Japan Earthquake led to devastation in many parts of the Tohoku region. Ayako was touched by the generosity of Americans, many of them former JET participants, who quickly organized fundraising initiatives. Inspired by their actions, she considered what she and her network could do.

"We came up with this idea of an online exchange program for high schools in Tohoku and high schools in the United States that had Japanese language programs," she explains. "We launched a pilot online exchange between a high school in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, and one in Langley, Virginia."

That first exchange took place in 2012. The aim was not direct disaster relief, but rather to create meaningful opportunities for cross-cultural connection when few teenagers in Tohoku could travel abroad. This became the catalyst for Kizuna Across Cultures (KAC), the non-profit Ayako co-founded with Shanti Shoji, Noritaka Takezawa and Andrew Scronce. That initial exchange grew into Global Classmates, the signature program of KAC.

Today, Global Classmates has expanded into an annual six-month virtual exchange between about 80 schools in Japan and the United States, involving more than 2,000 students each year. Schools are paired one-to-one, and KAC's bilingual coordinators work closely with teachers to guide each exchange. Careful attention is paid to ensure there is broad geographic representation when selecting the candidate schools.



Students taking part in a virtual meeting through Global Classmates

The curriculum rests on three pillars: cultural understanding, collaborative language learning and international friendship. Unlike casual online chats that typically stop at self-introductions, the Global Classmates program fosters the levels of familiarity and trust needed for deeper, richer discussions on broader issues.

“We don’t want to stop at surface-level exchanges or impressions. We’ve always been dedicated to designing and facilitating the program in a way that allows deep conversations and real bonding to take place,” says Ayako. This is especially meaningful for Japanese students in regions with limited opportunities for international travel, as it brings the world into their classrooms.

### ***Working Toward a Common Goal***

KAC maintains a lean but effective structure for running the program. A core team of four to five members coordinates operations, supported by bilingual coordinators, interns and volunteers. In total, about 20 people contribute to facilitation in both Japan and the United States each year.

The teachers’ commitment is vital to the program’s success. In Japan, they are often English teachers, while in the U.S. they are typically Japanese language teachers. “I think that nowadays the role of a teacher is evolving from being just a giver of knowledge to more of a facilitator of learning. Our program really aligns with that shift. We want to work with teachers who are looking to provide meaningful experiences,” Ayako points out.

Bill Paris, a teacher of Japanese at Northern Valley Regional High School in Demarest, New Jersey, has been involved with Global Classmates since 2020. He is grateful for the support of a dedicated coordinator, which allows smooth collaboration with Japanese counterparts and promotes cross-cultural learning that benefits both students and teachers.



Teachers are a vital part of the program's success.

“Participation in Global Classmates positions me as a cultural bridge-builder who facilitates meaningful, authentic dialogue between students in the U.S. and Japan. Through a flexible and well-structured bilingual exchange curriculum, I can integrate global learning into my regular instruction without overwhelming my existing workload,” he says.

Mayumi Omori, an English teacher at Okayama Korakukan High School in Okayama Prefecture, echoes this sentiment. “One of the program rules—that teachers reply to partner schools and coordinators within two days—really made a difference to the quality of the exchange. It reminded me how important it is to keep communication flowing among everyone involved,” she says. “Watching the students grow through the program allowed me to reflect on my own professional growth, and renewed my sense of purpose as an educator.”

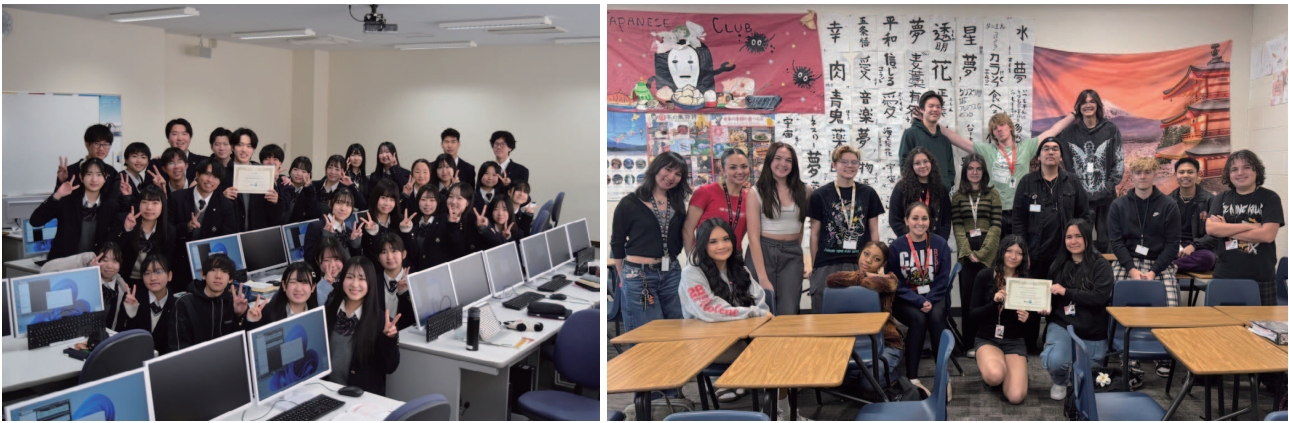
Global Classmates was ahead of the curve in adopting a remote model, well before COVID-19 accelerated the use of classroom technology. As a result, the KAC team was able to pivot smoothly when education worldwide was disrupted during the pandemic. The program has also attracted attention from the Japanese government, with potential to serve as a helpful blueprint for the future design of English education.

“Online exchange programs can deliver truly meaningful and transformative experiences when they are designed strategically and implemented in a thorough manner. I believe that is our strength and what makes us unique. Even today, we remain the largest provider of international online exchange programs for high school students in Japan,” notes Ayako.

### ***Holding Space for Each Other***

Another goal for Global Classmates is fostering intercultural competence: the ability to communicate effectively and collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds by being aware of assumptions, resolving misunderstandings and fostering mutual respect. Sometimes called “global competence”, KAC believes it is an essential skill for young people to thrive in today’s interconnected world.

Adapting to each other’s communication styles reveals how the students in the program are developing their intercultural competence. For example, English study is compulsory for Japanese high school students, yet many are reticent about using it and are shy about making mistakes, especially with people they don’t know. This was the case for Shiina Sugahara, a senior at Niigata Prefectural High School in Niigata Prefecture.



Cross-cultural connections: Japanese (left) and American participants in their classrooms

“At first, I was nervous—wondering if I’d be understood, or if what I said would even interest anyone. But I realized that as long as I had the desire and confidence to communicate, my partner also made the effort to understand,” Shiina recalls. “Using both English and Japanese, I felt my language sense improving, and it was exciting to see my ability to express myself grow. Through this back-and-forth, I felt the distance between us shrink.”

Most American students who study Japanese do so out of genuine interest in the language and culture. Despite limited skills, those who join the program are eager to try out their Japanese, which, in turn, encourages their Japanese peers to open up without fear of mistakes. This dynamic helps break down barriers and builds confidence on both sides.

Ayako has observed how the exchange shapes the American students’ communication styles with their Japanese counterparts when speaking in English. “I’ve been impressed to see American students taking time for the Japanese students to express their opinions, holding space for them to find their voices and the confidence they need to speak up,” she says. In a broader sense, she adds, this seems to reflect the values of inclusivity and connectivity to which many young people today aspire.

### ***The Global Classmates Summit***

In 2017, the program expanded to include the Global Classmates Summit, incorporating an in-person element and providing opportunities for selected participants to further cultivate their leadership skills. After being conducted online since the pandemic began in 2020, this past summer it was held in Washington, D.C. for the first time in six years.



Participants in the 2025 Global Classmates Summit in Washington, D.C.

From the 2,200 students who took part in KAC’s virtual exchange program last year, 14 high school students—seven each from Japan and the U.S.—were chosen to join the 10-day summit. They met with leaders in U.S.-Japan relations, participated in workshops led by international specialists in diplomacy, business and AI to shape their future vision, and joined team-building activities that fostered cross-cultural collaboration through peer learning.

The Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) has been supporting Global Classmates since 2018 and the summit since 2021. Some alumni have even returned as mentors, creating a cycle of engagement that demonstrates the program’s lasting impact.

“I gained a deeper understanding of Japanese youth culture from Global Classmates. What you find online or in class is the culture of adults and a generalized view of the country. Hearing from Japanese students gave me a candid insight into their personal culture,” says Logan Voelker, who participated as a student at Coronado High School in Henderson, Nevada. He was also one of the delegates at the 2025 Global Classmates Summit.



2025 Global Classmates Summit participants at one of the workshops

“This program inspired me to continue my Japanese studies into college, where I’m going to minor in Japanese. It also taught me about the importance of exchange programs, and I plan to study abroad as well,” Logan adds. The college freshman hopes to serve as a bridge between Japan and the United States in the engineering sector, contributing to bilateral relations in his future career.

### ***Towards a Future of Intercultural Understanding***

Follow-up surveys reveal that more than 80 percent of students finish the Global Classmates program with a stronger desire to study abroad. The experience goes beyond language study—it fosters cultural awareness and a desire to understand other cultures on a deeper level.

