



Sabrina Ghaus | El Estoque

## Scramble for seats gives students a jump in Japanese

Students bump up one level due to overcrowded class

by Christine Chang

In the past, students and teachers alike have found comfort in greeting the beginning of a new school year with proper school etiquette: clean desks, comfortable chairs, and the ambiance of a fresh, new start.

On the first day of school, however, many Japanese 3 students found themselves cramped in a room with more people than there were chairs. With almost half a hundred names spanned across the attendance sheet of teacher Keiko Howard's sixth period Japanese 3 class, several students spent the first two days hunched over the little space left on the floor. The stifling air, lack of proper seating, and enormous student-teacher ratio combined to make what several students agreed was a less efficient learning atmosphere.

"A single person would talk, and then everyone else would start talking. It got so loud the teacher had a hard time getting us to calm down," junior Lynn Chiao said.

According to Chiao, the large number of students made it more difficult for Howard to conduct casual and spontaneous in-class orals, which were often helpful in improving students' speaking skill in the past. With weaker interactions between Howard and the class, such as exchanging individual dialogue, a strained student-teacher relationship developed.

Before the first week of school ended, however, administration stepped in to resolve the problem by asking students to voluntarily skip Japanese 3 and continue with their two years' knowledge and Howard's approval onto Japanese 4 Honors. A few Japanese 3 students were keen on the idea of jumping ahead and agreed to have

their schedules changed to fit Japanese 4, taking nine people off the sixth period attendance list.

Assistant Principal Marriane Hew, who was responsible for coordinating the Japanese 3 to 4 shift, also attributed the unanticipated overcrowding largely to several students who made last-minute decisions to take the class. However, when 48 students showed up on the final Japanese 3 class roster, Hew decided it was crucial to the students' learning that the number be brought down without forcing any students to drop Japanese altogether.

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let kids take a [language class], then they'll never go onto 3, 4 Honors, AP, and you'll lose them," Hew said.

Hew wanted to ensure that every student who was interested in taking Japanese would be able to, regardless of class size.

For junior Connie Lu, the unexpected jump from level 3 to 4 has been a transition mostly in the fact that she now has to focus more on her speaking skills, rather than relying on written work to make the grade. Since the main emphasis of Japanese 4 is training students to become fluent in everyday dialogue, the class' greatest challenge is tying the knot between written and verbal aspects of the language.

For junior Alastair Vokach-Brodsky, who also transferred from Japanese 3 to 4, the biggest change was Howard's all-Japanese instructions, which picked up at a quicker pace in the honors class compared to instructions given in Japanese 2 and 3.

"Half of the learning is just in trying to make sense of what she's saying, but I guess that's the best way to learn," Vokach-Brodsky said. "Instead of having everything walked through, you have to make sure you know your stuff before coming to class."

Although crowding in the level 3 class has thinned out as a result of the shifts, Howard has her concerns for the students who skipped the level 3 course.

"A language is learned little by little," Howard said. "My personal evaluation is the [transferred students] should be in Japanese 3, but this is the only way we can solve the problem [of overcrowding]."

Since Howard had only recommended one out of all her Japanese 2 students to skip to level 4 during class selections in March last spring, the nine students who transferred up after the first week of school were only minimally qualified under Howard's personal standards. Her main concern is that students might not have enough familiarity with the language to fully experience the learning value that Japanese 4 Honors offers if they skip an entire year's course.

"Overcrowding is a problem because in the future, everyone will want to skip and not take level 3, and I will have to say 'Yes, you can skip because this room is too crowded,'" Howard said.

Crowded or not, administration asserts that students will need to make careful choices during course selection in the future to prevent last minute unexpected class overcrowding. A greater student population means less flexibility, fewer chances for students to switch in and out of classes at whim.