

Mai Ton

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In the time span of a month and a half, starting from the middle of May to the end of June, I flew to Japan, lived with a family of complete strangers, and learned to speak a language I barely knew. With the help of the Asian Undergraduate Research Award, I participated in Rice University's unique language intensive program called Rice in Japan. The program assigns students with a Japanese host family and aids them in making a schooling itinerary that helps students understand the cultural context of Japanese citizens and of the Japanese language itself. In only 6 weeks, I was expected to grow from barely being able to introduce myself in Japanese to being capable of holding full on in depth conversations with the Japanese citizens around me. This idea seemed utterly impossible to me, most especially at the beginning of the program.

When I first arrived in Tokyo, Japan, I was surrounded by foreignness and confusion. I had no idea what any of the signs around me said as I had a poor grasp of the Japanese Kanji writing system. I was afraid to approach any Japanese citizen because of my poor and rudimentary grasp of the Japanese language. Whenever people did talk to me, I could never quite understand what they were saying. In class, instruction was only given in Japanese and I was expected to uphold the language pledge, a pledge to only speak Japanese throughout my stay in the country. How will I ever connect with the people here? How will I learn this language when I am already so lost? How do I overcome this sense of not belonging?

Determined to not stay behind, I decided to throw away all of my insecurities. Who cares if people think I sound like an idiot? I am here in Japan to learn and I am definitely not going to become fluent right off the bat. When I met my language partner, a fellow college student at Kokugakuin University majoring in Japanese, I wanted to learn as much about her life growing up in Japan as I could. She showed the coolest museums to look out for in Tokyo (such as the Kusama museum and the Studio Ghibli museum), the most unique cafes nearby (such maid cafes and porcupine cafes), and all the different types of tapioca shops popping up around campus. However, we also talked about many topics that go beyond possible tourist locations. She told me about the differences in the Japanese college application system and just college life in general. She told me Japan's response to specific controversial topics such as their aging population and their lack of acknowledgement of the LGBTQ community. As I got to know her better and as I



*My host family welcomes me into their home with a big sashimi dinner.*

became more daring in my use of the Japanese language, I was able to explore more complex and intriguing topics.

In class itself, I approached all new topics with great enthusiasm. Adjusting to a new life in Japan was already difficult in and of itself, but students were also expected to also memorize new Kanji characters or new vocabulary words every single day. This process proved exhausting at first to the mind and the body but eventually, the rapid learning aided in adjusting to life in Japan. As soon as I would learn a new grammar pattern or a new word or a new Kanji character, I found myself using what I just learned immediately. I would see the new Kanji on an ad on the subway train. The new grammar pattern would help me with what I wanted to say to my host family that day. The new word, I would hear in a passing conversation. The quick application of the lessons we learned in class helped embed the concepts into my understanding of the language.



*We visited Japanese elementary classrooms and played English learning*

After class, I would always come back to a warm homecooked meal with my host family. They were completely understanding in my acquisition of the language and never pressured me to speak beyond my comfort zones. When I first met them, my host mom even used Google Translate to try to communicate to me the directions to my new house. When I proved to her that I

was able to understand and even ask simple questions about her family, she proved pleasantly surprised. Throughout my stay in Japan, my host family was always there for me whenever I had question regarding the language. They even helped me with my homework from time to time. On weekends, they would invite me to go karaoke-ing with them or playing with them on their Nintendo Switch. The time that I visited them was also a particular time of the year when a lot of the children had undoukai's at their school. Undoukai's are Japanese sports festival held at the campus of each school every year. The students compete in competitions and dance to bring well wishings to the upcoming school year. Being able to attend these festivals with my host family gave my insight into a uniquely Japanese tradition that I would never quite be able to understand from my upbringing in America.

Through the love, care, and patient understanding of my Japanese language teachers, of my host family, and my language partner, I was able to grasp a decent understanding of Japanese. Although my language skills still are far from perfect, I am no longer afraid to utilize what I do know of the language. I no longer hold myself back from pursuing my curiosity of the language, of the culture, and of the people. The deathly fear I had when I went into language consulting practices and of asking questions in class is now completely gone. From my time in Japan, I learned to become comfortable with myself and truly learn from the people around me.