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Confused by Japanese

I was fifteen years old when I arrived at Narita International Airport in Tokyo, Japan. I knew only three words in Japanese, *arigato* (thank you), *sayonara* (goodbye), and *kamikaze*. I had been awarded the privilege of spending one year in Japan as an exchange student. My scholarship was a gift from the Hattori family, in honor of their son, Yoshi. Yoshi Hattori had been an exchange student in the United States eight years earlier living with an American host family in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. On October 17th in 1992, Yoshi left his host family's home to attend a friend's Halloween party. He never made it to that party. He accidentally went to the wrong house and rang the doorbell. A man named Rodney Peairs came out of his house with a 44 magnum and shot Yoshi at close range. Yoshi was only sixteen when he died.

A trial took place and Rodney Peairs claimed that he shot Yoshi in self-defense. He stated that he believed that his life and the lives of his family members had been in danger. Supposedly, he had told Yoshi to leave his property and also said to him "freeze", but Yoshi didn't respond accordingly. Yoshi's level of English proficiency was at a minimum, and he didn't know the slang term 'freeze'. Rodney Peairs was tried and he was acquitted of manslaughter. This was a shocking verdict that caused international outrage, especially in Japan.

Yoshi's parents were my benefactors and they provided the money for my entire year of study in Japan. The reason Yoshi's parents chose my application from a couple hundred American students who applied, was the essay I had written concerning the need for stronger gun

control in our country. In Japan it is illegal for civilians to possess firearms. In return for their financial gift, Yoshi's parents asked me to participate in a national televised news interview, and to speak to newspaper reporters in Yoshi's memory. The interviews focused on gun control problems in the United States. I was asked to give my opinions about problems gun ownership causes in our country. Yoshi's sister acted as my translator and the interviews turned out to be much less difficult than I had initially imagined.

After spending a few days in Japan, reality began to sink in and I slowly began to realize what I had gotten myself into. Soon I found myself sitting in a classroom in Nagoya with my blurred gaze fixated on a chalkboard filled with odd scribbles and Kanji or Chinese characters. The Japanese written language uses a combination of three distinct writing systems. Hiragana for Japanese words, Katakana for foreign words, and it also incorporates thousands of Chinese characters or Kanji.

A different teacher would come into our classroom every hour and a half in orderly shifts to teach a variety of subjects. My homeroom consisted of 28 students who would remain a class unit for the entire three years of their high school education. We stayed in our home room all day long, we even ate our lunches in this classroom. The exception to this was when we would go to gym class, occasional trips to the library, or calligraphy class, also called shoto.

In all of our classes, my classmates never asked the teachers any questions. It was also quite rare for our teachers to call on any student to answer any questions. It became clear right away that the only person who would talk during any class would be the teacher. My classmate's heads always remained bowed with the exception of when they would need to look up at the chalk board, then they would quickly return to their hunched over writing positions. They had

the uniform appearance of odd birds with their heads bobbing up and down. My head never remained bowed for any length of time; my eyes would just scan the bleak room, as the monotonous drone of my teacher's voice would weave itself in and out of my daydreams.

From eight a.m. until four p.m. Monday through Saturday for one year, I sat in a hard desk chair made from slabs of wood that dug into the small of my back. The chairs provided just enough discomfort to keep me from actually falling asleep. I tuned out most of the eight hours a day and found an escape within my daydreams. I was completely isolated, as the only foreigner in a school of 900 students. I had to attend classes that were taught entirely in Japanese, a language with which I was completely unfamiliar.

Before arriving in Nagoya, I did not give a lot of thought to how difficult it might actually be to live in a foreign country, away from everything familiar in my life. I found myself contemplating this for many hours during the unbearably long classes in my new high school. Cold cement floors and walls covered in grey, chipped paint; who would have thought that such an advanced country would have such shitty high schools? The teachers had only chalk and a blackboard no other equipment was used in the classrooms. Since no Japanese was taught in the school, I appeared to be on my own. I was in a sink or swim situation; either learn Japanese on my own or have one hell of a miserable year unable to communicate with people.

It is not surprising that I started to teach myself hiragana and katakana, the two phonetic writing systems used in Japan. I avoided the complicated Kanji or Chinese characters. I began to learn from any information I could get my hands on. I borrowed coloring books and taught myself new vocabulary words. I memorized my entire English to Japanese dictionary and I had my mother send me several "Teach Yourself Japanese" books. She also sent a couple of

“guides” for American travelers visiting Japan. I devoured all of these books over a couple of months, until I finally had basic grammar concepts down. In addition, I had learned hundreds of new vocabulary words.

I made many mistakes as I tried to learn Japanese on my own. All of my books said that the word *anata*, translated as “you” in Japanese. So, I spent the first month in Japan calling everybody *anata*. Finally an embarrassed-looking Japanese woman, who could speak English, corrected me. She told me, in a quiet voice, that *anata* is a very informal term that is not to be used often. When a female says it to a male, the woman told me, it means “darling or sweetheart”. For almost a month I had been calling all the people I encountered “darling” or “sweetheart”! This explained why I received such odd looks from my classmates every time I spoke with my very formal teachers. It would have helped me immensely if there had been someone in my school willing to help me learn Japanese.

I also messed up the use of the words *kirei* (pretty) and *kirai* (hate) on several occasions. I said, “I hate somebody” or “I hate you”, instead of “he or she looks pretty” or “you look pretty”. After attending my classes at the high school for almost three months, I was approached by a boy in my homeroom class who told me in broken English that he had lived in California and that he knew “some English”. I responded to him by saying *uso* instead of *honto*. I had recently learned these two words and I was trying to incorporate them into my everyday speaking. I thought I was saying *honto*, an exclamation of “really” or “that’s great”, but I was telling him *uso*, which translates as “you’re a liar!” or “I don’t believe you”. It took me some time to realize what I had said to the startled looking guy and we never spoke again.

Most of my classmates began to ignore me after about three months. I had demonstrated that I was incapable of participating in any classes except gym, shoto (calligraphy), and English. I became a skilled Japanese calligrapher in our shoto class. I helped teach our English classes; but beyond that I didn't have the language skills to do the work in any of the other classes. Looking back, I can understand the dynamics that led to my social isolation in school. My lack of Japanese language skills was the major factor. Another reason was the fact that my classmates were in their first couple of months of a rigorous academic curriculum, as our high school was the top academic school in Nagoya. Their three years of high school would be spent cramming for entrance exams to competitive Universities. They had very little time for any social activities outside of school.

My makeshift Japanese improved significantly over a short time and after four months I could articulate basic sentences and express my needs and desires. I found myself understanding much more than I was able to articulate, when people spoke to me. I was able to understand parts of what people were saying about me, when they thought that I couldn't understand their conversations and whispers. I remember peoples' negative responses to me at school because I was learning Japanese too slowly. I found this hard to deal with. My general attitude at the time was "Screw you, why don't you try to learn English on your own!" I began to hate school and the isolation I had to deal with each day. I would often spend all day alone in our school library, reading Hemingway and Steinbeck. After five months, I had read the entire English and Spanish sections of the high school library. So when I ran out of these books to read, I moved on to reading simple manga (Japanese comics).

My life at home with my host family had become miserable. I had a host sister my age who seemed to hate me and a host mother who appeared overwhelmed with two teens in her home. I saw them for only a couple hours each day and they put little energy into conversing with me. We would eat breakfast and dinner together but aside from that I saw little of them. My host mother had 3 jobs and would leave for work at all hours of the day. My host sister shut herself in her room to do her schoolwork after dinner each night. This, along with school on Saturday allowed us little opportunity to communicate with each other. Their lives were extremely stressful and very busy. The five months I spent in their home added very little to my Japanese language learning; my student exchange organization allowed me to move to a new host family's home.

I moved to a rundown apartment complex called Brown Heitsu, which was located on a street with no name. In fact, none of the streets in Japan have names. My new host family included three children, Yukiho (age 7), Haito (age 5), and Satsuma (age 3), and their mother and father. We all somehow managed to live in an 800 square foot, two-bedroom apartment for seven months. My new host mother's elderly parents lived in an even smaller apartment just next door.

It was at this time that my Japanese began to improve rapidly. After school I would often spend the evening helping my host mother care for her children. We would do arts and crafts, watch cartoons, play in the park, and visit many interesting places together on the weekends. The contrast between my old host family and this one was remarkable. I was constantly speaking Japanese to the children, my host parents, and host grandparents. I had tons of time and many ways to practice my Japanese. It didn't take long for me to feel like I was part of their family structure.

My new host mother knew how much I disliked my high school and she would often call the attendance official and excuse me as “ill” for the day. On these days I would accompany her on shopping errands, visits to our local temple, her children’s events, and visits to common tourist attractions along with her three-year-old son, Satusma. With so much activity and opportunity to speak Japanese I was no longer feeling isolated and began to really enjoy my life in Japan.

After eight months of living in Japan, my Japanese language skills had improved dramatically. It helped so much to have the opportunity to speak Japanese outside of school and with people of all ages. In this respect, my new host family literally changed my life in Japan. Through their acceptance of my (very) elementary Japanese and with their encouragement to improve, they showed me how learning a new language could evolve into a very positive experience.