

This weekend I went to Hakusan-cho for a home stay weekend that was organized for ALTs in Mie. About 20 ALTs descended on the town in the mountains, and we had a fun weekend learning about our Japanese host families and Japanese culture.

When we arrived on Saturday afternoon, there was a barbeque for all of the participants, and we taught our host families about traditions and traditional songs from our home countries. The ALTs from Australia, Ireland, Canada and England sang their national anthems, but since the American national anthem has so many high notes and is so difficult to sing, the Americans opted for a lively rendition of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” We call baseball our “national pastime” in the United States, and more Americans probably know the words to “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” than any other song. It was a fun afternoon, and since my host father was in charge of the barbeque, I stayed to help clean up before we headed home.

After the barbeque I was really surprised at the cleanup process. One difference between the United States and Japan that has been difficult to get used to is the trash sorting system. I know that it is more efficient to separate the trash and dispose of different materials differently, but after living in the US my whole life, it is very difficult to get used to. I was dreading large-scale sorting of all the trash we had created during the barbeque, but I was quite surprised at what happened next. We put all of the trash into a box and then dumped the whole box in the grill and let it burn. I found myself wondering, “Is this safe?” If it is, then why don’t we ever do this at home? Massive amounts of trash were reduced to a simple pile of soot which was promptly buried, leaving the campsite looking immaculately clean. What a surprise!

When I finally got to my host family’s house, I was forced to speak and struggle to understand Japanese, but I was surprised at how easy it was! I was speaking broken Japanese and only understanding about 50% of what was said to me, but the simple fact that I managed to get by without using any English was a big accomplishment for me! Dinner was an impressive sushi spread, and the grandmother came over from her attached home and ate with us. She was the nicest old lady, but it was frustrating that I couldn’t understand anything she said. I spent the evening telling my host mom and dad about my family at home, and they told me about their life and family here in Japan.

On Sunday morning, the international affairs division in Hakusan-cho organized a cultural event for all of the participants to try various Japanese arts and traditions. We could try everything from shamisen to kimono, origami to tea ceremony, and just about anything else you could think of. I particularly enjoyed the calligraphy

and paper cutting (I don't know the actual name) even though it was a bit tedious. After the cultural event, everyone went their separate ways, and I went to lunch with my host dad at an okonomiyaki restaurant before heading back to Tsu. My host mom and dad were really nice people, even though they were nervous at first because they didn't speak English. By the end of my stay, we could communicate much more easily in Japanese, and I look forward to going back to visit them in the future. They even promised to teach me Japanese cooking!

During the whole weekend I was really surprised at how much I could communicate in Japanese. I've been here for about a month and a half, but rarely am I actually in a situation where I must speak Japanese. In my day to day life, there is usually someone around who can intervene and translate or simply do things for me when I can't be perfectly understood in Japanese. Now, I am beginning to realize that being perfectly understood isn't the most important thing. With a few hand gestures, an electronic dictionary and the motivation to learn Japanese, I can make myself understood even if it takes a little bit longer than letting someone else translate.

I learned a lot about the Japanese way of life this weekend, but more importantly, I was forced to practice speaking Japanese through the interaction with my family. I wanted to tell them about myself and they wanted to explain things to me, so it was a good motivation to concentrate on Japanese. It's easy to be discouraged from speaking Japanese especially when I know I am making many mistakes. Even though I'm sure I made many mistakes this weekend, I was very encouraged by the fact that my family could still understand. Now I'm less embarrassed about making mistakes in Japanese. If I am too afraid to make mistakes in Japanese, I'll never learn.