

This Sunday I caught a train to Nagoya at 6:45 in the morning. Why, you ask? The day had finally come to take the Japanese Proficiency Test, or 日本語能力試験. One of my goals in coming to Japan was to learn Japanese, so even before I was accepted to the JET Program, I was thinking about taking this test. Many people have never heard of it before, because it is not very well known in America. The test is given only once a year, on the first Sunday in December, both in Japan and in other big cities around the world. Since my brother studied Japanese for a long time, and passed a few levels, I had known about the test. I didn't really want to give up my life as a student after my college graduation, so I thought it would be fun to have a test to study for this year. Without something to work towards, I was afraid I wouldn't study Japanese as hard as I could.

The Japanese Proficiency test has 4 levels. The lowest level, level 4, is aimed at people who are just beginning to study Japanese, so I followed my older brother's advice and I aimed for level 3. In this level, there are 300 kanji, and the test taker is expected to read and write relatively simple Japanese. I thought this sounded right up my alley! Luckily for me, unlike the English Proficiency test that is for Japanese people who are studying Japanese, none of the levels of the Japanese test have any interview portions. The test is made up of three sections: kanji and vocabulary, listening, and grammar and reading. All four levels of the test have the same format, but the content becomes more difficult in the higher levels.

To be honest, I didn't think taking the level 3 test would be too difficult. I guessed that the kanji section would probably be the most difficult, and since that is the part of Japanese that I like studying best, I didn't think I would have any problems. On the day of the test, kanji was the first section! There were all kanji that I recognized and have been studying for a few months so I thought the rest of the test would be a breeze. It was not. Vocabulary and grammar (or course) were very difficult. I realized that teaching myself Japanese grammar out of a textbook is not the same as learning it from a teacher in class. The test was really difficult, but even if I didn't pass, I learned a lot more in the past few months than I would have otherwise, and that is all that matters to me. There were a lot of words and grammar on the test that I had never seen or heard before, but in the few days since then, I have heard a lot of these new expressions used on TV or in conversations. I am slowly but surely becoming more familiar with the things that were on the test, so even though it is over now, I think I will learn all the material eventually.

I don't know much about the English Proficiency exam except what Taniguchi sensei just explained to me today, but it seems like it is much more structured and

regulated than the Japanese test. In the English test, each level represents a different level of English, for example, Junior High, Senior High and College level English skills. Since kanji seems to be the biggest stumbling block for foreigners (English speakers at least), this is the most common way to classify each level of the test. Level 4 has about 80 kanji, level 3 has 300, level 2 has 1,000 and level 1 has 2,000 kanji. Of course, as the kanji becomes more difficult, so does the grammar, listening and reading.

Many people who want to work or study in Japan were very stressed about the test this weekend, because they can only take the test once a year. There is a huge jump in difficulty from level 3 to level 2, and an even bigger one to level 1. Even if I did pass level 3 this year, I will have to study very hard for the next twelve months if I want to consider taking level 2 next December.

I think it was a great experience to take this test. Last week was a little bit stressful as I was trying to memorize last-minute grammar points, but I am happy that I challenged myself and tried the test even if I didn't pass. I won't receive my results until February. I'm even happier to study now because I don't have to worry about studying specifically for a test. Just yesterday I started working in my new kanji workbook of the next 1,000 characters that I'm trying to learn. We'll see how that goes!