

At the conference for ALTs in Tokyo a few weeks ago, there were a lot of different workshops that were intended to help us make our work experience in Japan more meaningful. In addition to themes like “Team Teaching” and “English Outside the Classroom,” there was one workshop called “ペラペラ: Learning Japanese” that I found particularly inspiring.

One of my goals when I came to Japan was to learn Japanese. It has proven much more difficult than I initially imagined! Especially working at a school like Tsu Nishi, it is unnecessary for me to speak Japanese at work. Even though I want the practice, my job is to speak English. I have seen a lot of progress in the students’ English, so it is definitely worthwhile. Recently, the students in tennis have been teaching me some words in Japanese like 空振り、湿気 and ジメジメする. Slowly but surely, I must be getting better at Japanese, but it is difficult to actually see my own progress!

In a third year English reading class that I help with at Tsu Nishi, the students read some of the most complicated English texts that I could imagine for their level. The class is structured well, and because of the review of new vocabulary words and translation from English to Japanese and back, it proves to be a good exercise for my Japanese study too. Yesterday I was working in pair with one student, and it really helped me to empathize with the students who are struggling to translate from Japanese into English when I am trying in vain to do the opposite, too. The assignment was to read the English text (in my case, the Japanese), circling the words that we didn’t understand. Then we looked at the other language and tried to figure out the words that we didn’t know. The frustration for me was that I could generally match up the Japanese word or phrase with its English counterpart, but I could never actually read the kanji so I ended up solving the puzzle but not really learning anything.

Until now, I had been studying my kanji workbook religiously, looking up on-yomi and kun-yomi, practicing stroke order and what seems like millions of vocabulary words. But somewhere in the middle of May, they all started to look the same! Until I went to the workshop in Tokyo, I felt like I was getting nowhere with my Japanese study (and never would, for that matter). The workshop didn’t offer any revolutionary way to learn Japanese with ease, but the speaker gave a new perspective on studying. His suggestion was incorporating study into something that I like. Usually, this is what I do. I don’t particularly like the idea of sitting down with a textbook to study, but I like to draw, which is what kept my attention on kanji for so long. I like to read, so now I am on the lookout for good stories in Japanese that are not TOO difficult. I’ve been reading 星の王子様, and it has proven to be a great way to

review the readings and usage of a lot of kanji and grammar that I've already learned, in addition to the fact that it's fun!

It can be really frustrating trying to learn a new language that is so different from your own. Any of you who have studied English can understand that, I'm sure. Although it's easy to get discouraged, I am trying to absorb as much Japanese from my surroundings—TV, signs, radio, casual conversations—and put it to use. If you have any suggestions of a good (and simple) novel that I can read next, please let me know!