

About two weeks ago, I took the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, level 2. I was afraid that it would be too hard for me, but last year I passed the third level, so there didn't seem to be much choice for me but to do my best on level 2. It was a pretty hard test, but even if I didn't pass, it definitely motivated me to study more Japanese than I might have otherwise. It also made me think a little bit more about myself and my own experience learning Japanese.

I think I wrote this in my journal before, but my brother also studied Japanese. He was a Japanese major in college, at the same university where I majored in French. Sometimes I couldn't believe that he studied Japanese. All those kanji seemed almost impossible for me as I was struggling to learn a language that was very similar to English. He must just be one of those people who is good at languages, I thought. Then I started to learn Spanish, too, and at the end of my year living in France, I decided that I might want to come to Japan and teach English in the JET Program. Still, I was a little bit afraid of Japanese. I decided to take an intensive Japanese class every morning for my whole senior year of college, to make my chances of learning Japanese while I was here that much better.

I remember hearing my brother speak Japanese on the phone with his host family or seeing him type out an email to them on Christmas Eve. It still seemed so far away for me. I can't believe that now I, too, can speak Japanese on the phone or type out an email to a friend even using Kanji. It's been a little more than 2 years since I've started learning Japanese, and it's amazing how much my perceptions of the language have changed. Kanji are no longer just letters with lots of strokes that seem impossible. A lot of them have more meaning for me, and if I'm lucky, I even know how to read some. When I hear someone chattering away in Japanese, I no longer just hear a long string of sounds—now I hear words, even if I don't know what they mean. I am far from what you would call a dedicated student, and I have learned this much in the last two and a half years. It's hard to believe.

Whether or not I passed level 2 of the Japanese Proficiency Test, I am happy that I did my best and learned a lot of new things since last year. Because so many people speak English in Japan, it's easy to forget that learning the language is an interesting way to learn more about Japanese culture. Thanks to the friends I have made here, I haven't forgotten this and I have tried to improve my Japanese, little by little. But studying from a book is different from actually using the language—so instead of asking Moriguchi-san to translate this for me this week, I tried to do it on my own. I hope you understood!

