

Over the past few years, I have often written in my journal about my struggles and small victories studying Japanese. Sometimes I think, “my Japanese is not so bad!” but this is not one of those weeks.

Before I came to Japan, I studied Japanese for a year. It was a great way to learn the basics but when I arrived, I was sadly out of the loop and struggling to understand for about a year until I finally started picking it up more easily. While I have studied hard to get to my current Japanese level, I definitely skipped over a lot of detailed grammar lessons along the way. So this week, when I took a test to enter a translation and interpretation course this year, I was reminded of how much studying I still have yet to go.

As you already know, I am starting a job in August where I will need to speak Japanese every day, and make presentations in Japanese in front of large groups of people, too. I am looking forward to the challenge, although when I really think about making official presentations in Japanese, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t get a little bit nervous. In order to hopefully ease the transition into my new job and also to give me added motivation to study for the upcoming Japanese proficiency test this December, I applied to enter the translation and interpretation course, and the entrance exam was held at school this week. I was sent the testing materials by mail, and one of the teachers at my school proctored the exam for me (to make sure I didn’t cheat!). The test had a lot of kanji, grammar and reading questions, as well as a translation and interpretation section, complete with a tape for listening and a tape and microphone to record my answers.

I’m not the type to get nervous about tests. But when I saw the difficult questions on this test, and had a teacher from my school watching (and listening) to me, I got more nervous than usual. The grammar section was horrific and my English-Japanese translations were terrible, at best. I wrote one of my answers pretty much all in hiragana! It was a wake-up call: I have a lot of studying to do this month!

I won’t find out the results of my test until the end of the month, but the damage is already done. I was relatively confident about starting my new job in August but now I have an unsettling feeling that I have a LOT more studying to do. But where should I start? How do I make up for four years of studying kanji and overlooking all of the complicated, grammatical details? It’s definitely a big challenge, to improve my Japanese before my next job, but I’m glad I took that test because it gave me the motivation I need to pour it on before the end of July. Whatever happens, at least I will understand more than I did in my first month as an ALT!