

Word Count: 500

Japanese has never come easily to me. Honestly, it's a brutal language to learn. But despite the countless challenges I've faced, I've devoted more than half of my life to learning it. Sure, I've experienced the occasional outburst; I've sobbed because I couldn't understand a Japanese sentence, no matter how hard I tried to dissect it. I've also cursed. A lot. The journey to fluency is tough. But I can't imagine a life without Japanese—and I don't think I'd ever want to.

I took my first Japanese class when I was twelve. Initially, my interest in the language was superficial; I loved anime and manga and thought Spanish was boring. Over time, however, I developed a far deeper connection to Japanese culture. But despite my growing passion for Japan, my career goals remained convoluted. I knew I wanted to write and translate, but what exactly? On top of that, I was still a somewhat taciturn conversationalist. And as for kanji, well, let's just say kanji and I have a rocky relationship.

After studying Japanese for five years in junior high and high school, I entered college and declared a double major in English and East Asian languages and cultures. I received As in my Japanese classes, but I couldn't shake the feeling I was an impostor. After all, I wasn't really good at Japanese; I was just good at doing homework. It was a feeling I'd harbored for years.

And then things changed.

My junior year I studied abroad in Osaka for a semester, where I spoke exclusively in Japanese with a wonderfully supportive host family. I also discovered my passion for Japanese literature. Suddenly, life was making sense.

A year later, I received my bachelor's degree and left for Japan again, this time as an English teacher on the JET Program. Sitting alone in an old tatami room, in a town where virtually nobody spoke English, I started to visualize a future for me: I was going to improve my Japanese and steadily forge a path toward professional translation. In the two years I lived in Kyushu, I devoted myself to the language and culture around me. Occasionally, I attempted a Japanese novel but became frustrated by the deluge of unfamiliar kanji. Still, I kept going. I took the JLPT N2 twice—failing first by two points and then by one point—before finally passing it six months later. A week ago I braved N1.

Here's the thing: I am not a prodigy, nor am I particularly gifted at Japanese. As much as I love the language, there will always be a kanji I'll struggle to recall, a word I can't pronounce (hint: it starts with 店 and ends with 員). What I am, however, is passionate, creative, and ambitious. I'm a lover of stories and languages. Japanese is the path I want to take, the career I strive for, the language I speak—and the life, no matter how challenging, I intend to live.