

CLS Post-Program Participant Report

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My experience studying abroad in Japan on the Critical Language Scholarship left me with many lasting memories and life lessons that I will attempt to document here, but no reflection can properly recapitulate or recapture their significance or my gratefulness for the opportunity.

As both a young adult and student of Japanese language and culture, I think the aspect of immersion most important to me was assimilating the culture and learning - if not adopting - its differences into my own habits. Fittingly, this key objective actually enjoys a central role in the way many Japanese children are raised, in that they learn not only behavioral lessons in class but also cues and signs in what one of my newly befriended natives called 「空気を読む」, which literally translates to "reading the air." I know not how precisely this skill is taught, but it formed the central topic of discussion during an intense dinner with a native student, who was explaining the difficulties she faced as a Japanese native in reading the minds of her friends and teachers. However Japanese youth acquire this skill, I had to learn it quickly in order to truly learn about anything else, because few negative things are ever spoken directly in Japanese culture, which is something I truly appreciated. On the one hand, we Americans hear that "silence speaks louder than words," but the Japanese really execute the axiom much more successfully; complaints are seldom levied directly or publicly, and even rejection is done tacitly, to save both parties face. On the other hand, the skill really shines in teaching us to be more aware, not just of unspoken opinions but also of people and their emotions. As indirect or counterproductive as it may seem, it leads to greater consideration, sympathy, understanding, and cognizance of people around us. In that way, I was learning not only how the Japanese communicate, but also how to better understand them and people in general simply by listening and reading visual and aural cues, much as a computer vision system might extract eigenfeatures to judge emotion. It was the most valuable lesson I learned, and one I exercise every day.

Along with lessons about how to learn, I gained a certain ineffable self-confidence in my ability not only to survive but also to enjoy the journey along the way in Japan. Cultural differences that were initial inconveniences quickly metamorphosed into enjoyable experiences. I swiftly learned the importance that the Japanese attach to being on time, and readjusting my schedule to reach that target was an adventure that both improved my time management and brought me closer to one of my language instructors, who was caring enough to propose strategies for beating the clock as if I were locked in a Pokémon battle with it each morning. Similarly, initial unfamiliarity with the train system and shopping centers spawned exciting new opportunities to ask for directions, prompting both feedback on my language and model responses; following initial misunderstanding of my question or objective, nothing could reaffirm or reinforce my growth in language acquisition better than a lighting of the eyes when my rephrased question or new choice of words resonated at last. I learned early on how to rephrase and reword a confusing concept in the most basic way to elicit understanding, and refining that skill as I asked more and more questions was an enlightening and enjoyable process. Finally, the most rewarding hurdle to scale was the general shyness of Japanese people, particularly girls. I knew from my interactions at the Pokémon World Championships that the Japanese, however knowledgeable or skilled they may be, tend to prefer modesty and reserve to sharing their feelings with strangers from the outset, so I knew I had to overcome my own diffidence to break the ice. Motivated by my peer tutor's limited availability, I made it a point to accost and befriend as many Japanese students as I could between my classes (and the dining hall and school-wide common lunch hour facilitated this); despite occasional coyness or rejection, my successful encounters begat spirited conversations and often lasting friendships that defined the study abroad experience. Each successful exchange fueled my conversational confidence, and, most importantly, forged a friendship that further expedited my assimilation and soon thereafter filled my weekends with unforgettable happiness, such as my first Japanese movie (Pokémon), plush shopping sprees, and dessert dates. Studying abroad would not have been the experience it was without Japanese friends to enrich and inform it.

The most significant life change that the program precipitated was my appreciation for the other aspects of Pokémon outside battling. As a competitive stateside player raised and battle-hardened by the very American braggadocio and bravado rampant in the American competitive Pokémon community, I appreciated Pokémon mainly for its brilliant gameplay balance and competitive metagame, but my study in Japan exposed me to other avenues of appreciation. For example, even college students enjoyed the game for its pure fun and its pleasant, family-friendly image. Japanese girls, however old, never outgrow their Disney plushes and Pokémon apparel, and that kind of appreciation for cuteness, character connotations, and, in a word, *image*, rubbed off on me and symbiotically increased my own appreciation. I learned that Pokémon does not have to be competitive - or even strategic - to be fun and influential; many college students dream of raising their children playing family-friendly games like Pokémon with them, and even more females religiously remember the cutest Pokémon species to stay in fashion. That culture both charmed my inner child and convinced me that I not only belonged in such a culture but - beyond mere survival - could thrive in it. As a microcosm of my entire experience studying in Japan, this transformation opened my mind to Pokémon's beauty beyond the pixels on the screen or the RNG in its software, instilling an appreciation for the entire image and a desire to participate further in its creation.