

My first exposure to the Japanese language came from a rather unorthodox place. It was September of 2020, and after six months of having virtually no education, I was ordered to go to my first in-person day of school. By the time my family knew to go shopping for school supplies, the shelves were cleared. During my first week of school, I was resigned to shoving papers directly into my backpack. One of my new classmates saw me struggling to find Algebra notes in my backpack and offered up some of their old binders from home. Although hesitant for health reasons, I happily accepted and took the binders.

While emptying the old notes, I came across a binder labeled “Kumon”, and on further inspection I found a few worksheets on the Japanese language. It was from that day I decided to learn the language, even if it was just to have something to occupy my time when I wasn’t allowed outside. I erased the writing on those Kumon worksheets and began to work out the answers over and over again, but naturally I grew bored of that.

I wanted to take Japanese in middle school but they did not offer the language. As a result, I was forced to rely on free — and usually incorrect — online resources to teach myself. I often felt as if there was no point in me trying due to the lack of quality sources. I was so close to giving up, but then I heard that my high school offered it and I jumped at the chance. My passion for the language was reignited thanks to Ms. Eshita, my Japanese teacher.

Japanese is such a unique language, and despite all of the eccentric grammar rules I was hooked. For all of its uniqueness, however, Japanese is also a simplistic and logical language, which contributes to its overall beauty. It strikes a perfect balance between its dynamic and contextual nature, and following uniform grammatical rules for learning purposes.

The social issue that interests me the most is the rural population decline and the rapid urbanization of Japan. A lot of teens have a negative outlook on rural life for many reasons, such as the lack of modern infrastructure, educational opportunities, and job opportunities just to name a few. As everyone moves to larger cities, rural areas begin to die, and local traditions die along with them.

I believe that I would benefit incredibly from an in-person experience in Japan. Sure, I have learned grammar and vocabulary from my textbooks, but being immersed with native speakers is really the best way to learn how people actually talk. I have learned most of my pronunciation and the natural flow of Japanese speech from Ms. Eshita. Although she is an amazing teacher, there is only so much she can cram into less than 4 hours a week of class time. In Japan, I would be permitted to speak more often with native speakers, to learn truly authentic Japanese.