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from Burlington &
Burlington Lakeshore

to

Japan

“humans are social creatures”

You might have often heard the phrase that “humans are social creatures.” In my interpretation of this saying, I would say that humans cannot live without communicating with other humans. This has a double meaning I think, one meaning refers to how humans need communication as a necessity for growth and development, and the other meaning refers to how despite how hard one can try not to, one might find it impossible to *not* communicate. This is because humans have more ways of communicating than just words. A lot of our daily communication with others occurs non-verbally, usually presented through body language or facial expressions. No matter how hard you try, these visual queues will be noticed and picked up on by other people. So long as you are not alone in a room being unobserved, you will be communicating with others whether you like it or not. When one goes on international student exchange, they will very quickly realize this.

My exchange has gone on for three more months since my last BeaverTale report, but I feel like within those last three months I’ve changed more drastically than I have in the three months since arriving in Japan and my first report. The first and biggest change pertains to language skills. In my previous report, I discussed that my Japanese skills had only started to develop a foundation. Since then, my speaking and listening has continued to improve. The way my Japanese skills currently are, I am able to understand about 80% of what people say to me, and I am able to respond 100% of the time. I finally reached a self-sustaining level of speaking fluency in where I can use Japanese to communicate to someone else what specific words I didn’t understand in their sentence, and what parts I’d like them to rephrase in a simpler way. With that in consideration, whether it’s a response that continues a conversation, or it’s a response that asks for clarification, I find myself always able to speak to the person talking to me. As a consequence, I haven’t spoken any English for about two months, aside from when I have to talk with the other Rotary inbound exchange students here.

I'm still surprised at how this big jump in speaking ability occurred, as it seemed to happen entirely overnight, where one day at school I just happened to find myself talking to, understanding, and asking questions to the other students in my class as it were second nature, where the day before I was completely silent and unable to converse as usual.

Within the first few months of my exchange, I wasn't communicating in meaningful or intimate ways with the people in my class, I was only studying by myself. As I said earlier, all people need communication, it's necessary for the human body. I was nearing my limit when suddenly my speaking revolution happened. As a natural consequence of my change in speaking ability, I was suddenly able to communicate much more with the people in my class. As I write this report, I have two friends in my class I would consider to be good friends that I can talk to anytime, and I have a few more classroom buddies that I talk to on occasion. At the very least, I feel like now I am acquainted with everyone in my class, rather than being a stranger.

Of my two friends, the first one is Masahiro Kawamura. He's a tall dude, about 5'9 or so, and he's the only boy in my class that sweeps up his bangs so his forehead is visible. He loves English and, when the school year started, he approached me himself and asked me to tutor him in English. In return he'd tutor me in Japanese. That's how our friendship started, I suppose. Nowadays, I only speak to him in Japanese unless he requests that I read some material for him in English. He has a deep interest in Western movies, and I have to say myself that his taste is pretty good. I've found that in Japan, among high schoolers, the only popular western movies tend to be the popular action flicks like the Marvel superhero movies, or Disney movies. Masahiro was the first guy I met that broke that stereotype for me. Some of his favorite movies include Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Bastards* and Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* series.

Masahiro has been a really big influence on my development here in Japan. He always gives me feedback on my language skills, telling me how much I've improved and what things I should focus on improving more. He and I have spent lots of time after school and on weekends walking around town and eating at various restaurants. His favorite subject in school is history, as he specifically has an interest in war and world history. He likes to talk to me about topics like that, and we've had our fair share of discussions about World War 2, and so on. Occasionally, he'll ask a deep and difficult question very casually without realizing it, and he'll be too naive to notice, and he'll expect me to know the answer. For example, some of the crazy things he's asked me out of the blue include "Do you know the reason why Hitler started World War 2 and the Holocaust?", or "Do you know why people invented communism?", or "Do you know the meaning of life?", and so on. Some of our favorite pastimes are exploring Kanazawa together with Max, one of the other inbound exchange students, deep into the night. We've seen almost every corner of the city together, and we've shared many laughs together as well.

My second friend is Taiyou Matsuki. While I call Masahiro by his first name, I still call Matsuki by his family name. Everyone else does it, and I suppose it's become a habit for me too. In September, when I first started attending school, Matsuki sat right next to me. Matsuki doesn't speak any English. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's failing his English classes. When we sat together in September, it was exceptionally hard to communicate. Matsuki is a very shy person. On top of this, I hardly spoke any Japanese at all. Since that time, the seating arrangements have been changed around some more, and now they've returned to

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the same positions they were in back in September. However, what's changed now is that my Japanese speaking fluency has improved beyond words (haha), and Matsuki and I have been spending lots of time every day talking and making jokes. Matsuki is a very shy person, so he wasn't able to work up the courage to talk to me earlier in the year. But we've gotten closer since we both realized we enjoy playing the same video games.

Although I'm finally getting the hang of casual conversation, I feel like I still have a lot to learn. Masahiro and the others in my class are helping me every day, and if everything keeps progressing as it is, I should become fluent by the end of my exchange. I feel my English slipping, writing this report was strangely more difficult than the previous. I find a lot of the words I need to be missing from my head. I'm going to continue doing my best every day so I can become more integrated into my Japanese life.



Left to right: Max (Inbound Rotary Student), Masahiro, Me

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