

Itadakimasu is a Japanese phrase that can best be translated to English as “to humbly receive.” The phrase is said before eating a meal. It is meant to show your gratitude for those who prepared the food. The first time I heard this phrase was from my Japanese tutor, Yuko. After picking shiso leaves in her garden, we washed them in the sink and carefully cut them into small strips. We worked together to form balls of rice packed with fish eggs and the shiso leaves. We went outside onto her porch and enjoyed the onigiri together during the warm August afternoon.

Growing up, I had only ever spoken English. When I started high school, I was beyond excited to have the chance to study a foreign language. A few weeks in, my enthusiasm for foreign languages grew so much that I wanted to explore learning opportunities beyond the classroom. I started looking into semester abroad programs in Japan. As I communicated with my school, I found out study abroad programs weren’t supported during the school year. Despite that obstacle, I enrolled in a year-long Japanese class at my local community college while still attending high school full time.

As I entered sophomore year, my high school schedule conflicted with the college Japanese classes. In spite of that, I started taking lessons from a Japanese tutor from Kyushu Prefecture who taught fully immersively. I had no idea how much fun this new way of learning would be. Yuko and I bonded over our love for cooking. Everytime I went over for a lesson, we would cook a new Japanese dish. I was introduced to a whole new way of both preparing and sharing food. I started picking up on the language faster than ever. I realized how truly impactful immersion can be.

I knew that to continue to grow my language ability, I would need to physically go to Japan. What I’ve learned from Yuko has emphasized to me how important it is to pick up language through experience. I’ve also discovered that learning goes both ways. Communication is about connection between people. I’ve realized that these interactions create the chance for an understanding between cultures, as Yuko and I have both learned from each other. Creating those shared interpersonal connections is not something that can be simulated virtually.

One of the greatest lessons I’ve learned from Yuko is the importance of gratitude. I often think about how I could share this appreciation with others. Even with the amount of Japanese I’ve learned so far, it has already broadened my perspective of the world. I’ve come to find that I want to pursue a career as an interpreter. I could encourage international understanding by

helping people of different cultures communicate and connect with each other. As someone deeply passionate about continuing to learn Japanese, I believe the opportunity to visit Japan will open my eyes to a richer understanding of both the culture and language.