

Cultivating Growth: An Exploration of Lifelong Learning in Foreign Language and Traditional Arts

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In today's dynamic and ever-changing global environment, the commitment to lifelong learning has become a fundamental aspect of personal and professional development. This paper will delve into my immersive journey as a lifelong learner, focusing specifically on my experiences in learning the Japanese language and the traditional art of tea ceremony. These pursuits have not only enhanced my linguistic skills and broadened my cultural awareness in the past three decades, but have also profoundly influenced my mental growth and development.

My interest in the Japanese language and traditional arts can be traced back to my first encounter with Japanese animations and the Red-and-White Singing Contest, which I used to watch as a child in amazement. It was not until my sophomore year that I first learned the basics of the language, setting the stage for a one-year visit to Japan on a working holiday visa. During this time, I was introduced to various forms of mental training, such as *Zen*, *Kendo*, *Kyudo*, and *Tea Ceremony*. My inspiration to further pursue these disciplines became the catalyst behind my decision to prolong my stay in Japan while simultaneously embarking on a career in teaching.

Residing in Japan has provided me with an ideal environment to learn the target language. Surrounded by authentic and comprehensible linguistic input, it has become the primary driving force in enhancing my language acquisition. The Japanese language was transformed from mere lexical symbols in a textbook to a practical tool essential for daily functioning. While adjusting to a new life in a foreign language environment posed myriad challenges, it was a rewarding experience of implicit learning full of adventures and excitement.

In my spare time, I continued my self-directed study, following the usual repertoire of studying textbooks and doing practice exercises designed for foreign language learners. Without the pressure of earning school credit, I relished the autonomy to work at

my own pace and chose a learning style that suited me best. My motivation to continue learning was primarily driven by interest and intellectual curiosity--studying was fun and learning something new brought me immense joy and satisfaction.

To enhance my language abilities, I implemented a simple yet effective strategy: watching TV dramas and news broadcasts with Japanese subtitles. Without consciously exerting effort, I absorbed new vocabulary, slang, idioms, kanji and worked on my listening comprehension for several hours every day. The greatest benefit of this method lies in the inclusion of authentic contexts that aided in understanding pragmatics and subtle cultural nuances, which often defy explicit explanations. Additionally, beginner-friendly materials like comics served as a gateway to enhancing my reading skills. Thanks to exposure to abundant, authentic input and continuous self-study, I successfully obtained level 1 in the Japanese Proficiency Test three years later. Despite reaching this goal, I had yet to tackle materials like books or newspapers written at a native Japanese level. This marked the beginning of a new phase in my learning journey, with still a great deal of learning ahead of me.

Meanwhile, I have also begun engaging in mental training through traditional arts such as tea ceremony and kyudo. These disciplines are characterized by their emphasis on precise procedures and physical movements, like correct foot placement and handling of a tea bowl. Adhering to the meticulous instructions of tea making has been a valuable lesson in cultivating patience and perseverance. This mental training not only improved my concentration but also empowered me to control emotional upheaval, fostering inner calmness and reducing behavioral impulsivity. The heightened mental clarity also allowed me to become more observant and receptive to instruction, resulting in a significant enhancement of my overall learning capacity. The rigorous physical and mental discipline required by these practices has evidently highlighted the importance of maintaining a disciplined body and mind to unlock personal growth potential. Furthermore, the presence of a supportive mentor has been pivotal in my learning process. My tea ceremony teacher, who was open-minded and generous, shared her knowledge with me without any reservation. Her unwavering support has enabled me to sustain my

tea ceremony practice for over 2 decades and successfully obtain my instructor's license (*Koushi Shikaku*).

Another turning point in my lifelong journey of language learning occurred when my tea ceremony teacher suggested that her students attempt the *Sadou Kentei*, a knowledge-based certificate examination. The exam syllabus encompassed a 250-page advanced-level Japanese text written for native readers. Initially overwhelmed by the amount of unfamiliar kanji and topics like ceramics and Japanese history in the text, I found the exam beyond my reach. However, I soon noticed there were simple ways to tackle this daunting challenge. I began breaking down the materials into smaller, manageable chunks, setting a goal of studying only one short paragraph (approximately 80 words) each day. This shift towards establishing an easy-to-achieve target proved to be a game-changer. At the outset, navigating through the main text felt like dragging a heavy wagon in the mud, but my reading speed gradually improved after the "3-day hump", making it less painful to visually process a page laden with difficult kanji characters. While I often had to resort to contextual guesswork, especially during the exams, I eventually succeeded in passing level 1 of the Certificate Exam, despite the low success rate of 5-12%, albeit by a narrow margin.

Subsequently, overcoming the first hurdle of achieving native-level reading comprehension has provided me with the impetus for more extensive reading during the 3 year Covid lockdown, including materials such as novels, newspapers, and historical texts. Nevertheless, my linguistic development has been restricted predominantly to receptive skills due to the limited opportunities for extensive interactions with native Japanese speakers, both at home and in the workplace. Given the unfavorable environmental factors, regrettably, I doubt whether my Japanese speaking proficiency could make any substantial progress in years to come.

Over the past three decades, my experience as a lifelong learner of the Japanese language and traditional arts has involved overcoming challenges, finding effective learning strategies, and seeking supportive environments and mentors. While I have achieved certain success in examinations and obtaining qualifications, I am aware that there is still much to learn. As Albert

Einstein famously stated, “The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know.” Life itself is an ongoing process of discovery and there is no end to the pursuit of personal growth and development.