

Growing Through Language, Friendship and Cultural Exchange

Report for Meiji University Language Exchange Program

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Before coming to Japan, Japanese had always been more than just a language to me. It related to the anime, films, music, food, and everyday culture that I had enjoyed since childhood. I was born in China and later grew up in Singapore, so my background has always been shaped by more than one culture. Moving between different societies taught me that language is not only a tool for communication, but also a doorway into people's values, ways of thinking, and sense of belonging. Even so, for many years, studying in Japan remained a dream that felt quite far away. When my family moved to Singapore when I was fourteen, I continued to admire Japanese culture from a distance, but I did not have many opportunities to use Japanese in real life. Now, as a full-time student at Meiji University, I finally have the chance to live and study in Japan. I hope to work here in the future, and I know that understanding Japanese society more deeply is essential for building a meaningful life here.

This was one of the main reasons I decided to join the language exchange program. Of course, I wanted to improve my Japanese, especially my speaking ability. Classroom learning is important, but the language used in textbooks can feel different from the language people use in daily conversations. I also wanted to make Japanese friends and learn about domestic culture through real interaction rather than through books or social media only. At the same time, I hoped the program would not be one-sided. Because I grew up between China and Singapore, I felt that I could also share stories about my own cultural experiences and help my partner practise English. In that sense, I saw the program not simply as a study activity, but as a mutual exchange. I wanted to learn, but I also wanted to contribute.

Before meeting my language exchange partner in person, we first added each other on LINE and introduced ourselves briefly. Even that first online conversation helped me feel less nervous. I wondered what kind of person she would be, whether we would have enough topics to talk about, and whether the conversation would feel natural. When we finally met on the orientation day of the program, my first impression was very positive. She was pretty, friendly, and had a warm smile that made the atmosphere comfortable almost immediately. I still remember feeling relieved because she did not make the first meeting feel formal or awkward. We started talking about simple things at first, such as our studies, daily life, and reasons for joining the program. However, the conversation soon became much easier than I expected. We talked a lot, and I felt that both of us were genuinely interested in getting to know each other. That first meeting gave me confidence that the program could become more than a scheduled activity. It could become a real friendship.

After getting to know her better, my impression became even warmer and more personal. At first, I thought she was simply friendly and polite. Later, I realised that she was also sincere, considerate, and patient. We tried to meet about once a week. When we were too busy, especially during exam periods or assignment deadlines, we arranged an online meeting instead. This consistency was very meaningful to me, because language learning requires regular practice, but it also requires trust. During our meetings, I would often write down the English sentences or words she wanted to express and send them to her so that she could review them later. In return, she corrected my Japanese pronunciation, grammar, and word choices. She did not simply tell me what was wrong; she explained how a native speaker would express the same idea more naturally. Over time, our conversations

gradually moved beyond language practice. We began to talk about daily life, food, relationships, school, future plans, and small worries. We also went out for meals together. Through these ordinary moments, I felt that both of us improved our speaking ability, but more importantly, we became more comfortable being ourselves in another language.

One of my most unforgettable memories happened recently, after we had both finished a busy period of final examinations. Because we had not met for about a week, I was slightly worried that the rhythm of our conversation might feel different. In language exchange, continuity is important, and I thought perhaps we would need some time to become familiar again. However, when we met, everything felt natural immediately. We began talking as usual, and there was no distance between us at all. What touched me most was that she remembered that in the previous meetings, we had spent a longer time speaking English for her practice. This time, she took the initiative to speak more Japanese with me, so that I could have more opportunities to practise. It was a small action, but it showed a great deal of consideration. She was not only thinking about her own learning; she was also thinking about mine. That made me feel that our exchange was truly balanced and respectful.

Another detail that impressed me was her responsiveness. I had heard that in Japanese culture, people may not always reply quickly to messages that are not related to work or urgent matters. Of course, every person is different, and it is never good to generalise too much. However, because I had this impression, I was surprised and grateful that my partner usually replied to me very promptly. Her replies made me feel that she valued our communication and took the program seriously. After the final examinations, we also began planning to go out together during the summer holiday, take photos, practise conversations, and exchange small gifts. These plans may sound simple, but to me they represent the most beautiful part of the program. Language exchange is not only about sitting at a table with notebooks. It can gradually become part of one's student life, creating memories that continue outside the formal program schedule.

The program has also helped me understand Japanese culture in a deeper and more practical way. Before joining, I already knew some general ideas about Japan, such as politeness, social harmony, and respect for others. However, speaking with my partner helped me understand how these values appear in everyday communication. One concept that fascinated me was “kuuki wo yomu,” which means reading the atmosphere. My partner explained that in Japan, people often avoid saying “no” directly. Instead, they may use expressions such as “I will think about it,” or “That might be a little difficult.” At first, this indirectness can be confusing for foreigners, especially if they come from cultures where direct expression is more common. However, through our conversations, I began to see the cultural logic behind it. Japanese communication often places importance on protecting harmony and avoiding unnecessary embarrassment. People pay attention not only to words, but also to tone, facial expressions, silence, and the overall atmosphere.

What made this explanation especially interesting was the social background behind it. My partner and I discussed how, in traditional Japanese communities, people often lived in long-term village relationships where cooperation and coexistence were necessary. If conflict became too direct, it could damage relationships that people still needed to maintain for many years. From this perspective, indirect communication is not simply “unclear”; it can also be understood as a form of consideration. This helped me become more sensitive when communicating in Japanese. I realised that improving language ability is not only about memorising vocabulary or grammar. It is also about understanding when to speak directly, when to soften an expression, and how to show respect through the way we communicate.

At the same time, I also shared many things about China and Singapore with my partner. Although our official exchange was mainly connected with English, our conversations often became

multicultural. Singapore and Japan have some similarities, such as cleanliness, social order, and a strong awareness of public behaviour. Because of this, we often found common ground and could compare our experiences naturally. One of the most interesting conversations we had was about dating and relationships. After talking about it, we realised that China, Japan, and Singapore can have very different dating styles, expectations, and communication habits. These differences were not only funny or surprising; they also showed how culture influences personal relationships in subtle ways.

This process helped me rediscover positive aspects of my own cultural background. Sometimes, when we live abroad, we focus mainly on adapting to the host country. We try to learn the local rules, speak the local language, and avoid mistakes. However, when my partner asked me questions about China and Singapore, I suddenly became aware that my own background also contains many meaningful values. From China, I feel connected to a long history, rich food culture, strong family ties, and the ability to adapt through change. From Singapore, I appreciate multicultural coexistence, efficiency, safety, and the everyday experience of living among different languages and ethnic communities. Introducing these aspects to my partner made me feel proud, not in an exaggerated way, but in a quieter and more reflective way. I realised that cultural exchange is not only about discovering others. It is also about seeing oneself more clearly through another person's curiosity.

My language skills have improved through the program, but perhaps the most important improvement is confidence. Before, I sometimes hesitated to speak Japanese because I was afraid of making mistakes. I worried about using the wrong grammar, mispronouncing words, or sounding unnatural. However, my partner created a safe environment where mistakes did not feel embarrassing. If I could not express a full sentence, I could first say the key words, and she would help me build the correct expression based on the situation. This method was practical and encouraging. I learned many natural phrases that I might not have learned from textbooks. I also became more aware of pronunciation, rhythm, and polite expressions. At the same time, helping her with English made me think more carefully about my own language choices. Teaching someone else is also a way of learning, because it forces us to explain meanings clearly and notice details we usually take for granted.

The program also changed my student life at Meiji University. Living in a foreign country can be exciting, but it can also feel lonely when one's daily routine is limited to classes, assignments, and part-time responsibilities. Having a language exchange partner gave me a reason to communicate regularly with someone outside my usual circle. It made my life in Japan feel more connected and personal. Instead of only observing Japanese society from the outside, I could ask questions, share experiences, and gradually understand small cultural details from the inside. I am very grateful for this, because such understanding cannot be gained quickly. It grows through repeated conversations, small misunderstandings, laughter, correction, and patience.

For future participants, my message is simple: please do not be afraid to join, even if your language ability is not perfect. The most important thing is not fluency at the beginning, but the willingness to speak. Japanese students are generally very kind, and if you cannot express a complete sentence, using key words is already a good start. Your partner can help you find the right words, and you can do the same for them. Language exchange works best when both people are open, patient, and sincere. It is also important to meet regularly if possible, because trust and comfort develop over time. Even a short conversation each week can make a difference if both sides continue with genuine interest.

I also hope participants will see the program as more than language practice. It is an opportunity to build friendship, understand another culture, and share your own culture in a meaningful way. Sometimes the most memorable learning does not happen when we study difficult grammar, but when we laugh about a small misunderstanding, explain a cultural habit, or realise that another person has made an effort for us. I truly like this program and feel thankful that Meiji University provides such

an opportunity. I have also heard that some exchanges may stop halfway because of busy schedules or other reasons, which is understandable but also a little unfortunate. I believe that continued support, such as occasional group meetings during the semester where participants can share their progress and experiences, could help more students stay motivated. Still, the success of the program ultimately depends on the sincerity of each pair. For me, this language exchange has been a valuable part of my study abroad experience, and I hope future participants will also find not only better language skills, but also friendship, confidence, and a deeper understanding of the world around them.

The photos are parts of the daily conversations we had.

The first one was when I telling my partner the correct way of saying sentences.

The second part was the scene before meet up and I tried my best to talk to her in Japanese.

