

Wonderful and fun exchange with an international student

The University of Tokyo Kashiwa Committee, Kanna Asaka

I first met Chen-kun, an international student, in the fall of 2023 at KIO (now the Center for Global Education (Kashiwa Branch), GlobE Kashiwa) on the University of Tokyo's Kashiwa Campus. It was the three of us—the staff member, Chen-kun, and me. Since he was a young man, I remember quietly wondering to myself whether it was really okay that he wasn't paired with a male member. My first impression of him, though, was very positive. He seemed serious, kind, and like a genuinely nice young man. He told us that he had passed the N2 level, but his Japanese was still a bit hesitant at the time. Since I can hardly speak English myself, I remember feeling a little anxious and wondering whether we would be able to communicate well.

With his best effort in Japanese and help from the staff member at GlobE Kashiwa, we managed to communicate, and the time passed pleasantly. At the end of the meeting, the staff member asked him, "Do you have any final questions?" He then asked, "What does dattebayo from NARUTO mean?" NARUTO is one of Japan's most well-known anime—and, in fact, one of my personal favorites. I was caught off guard by the question and couldn't explain it very well at the time. After I got home, I rewatched several episodes starting from the first, came up with my own explanation, and sent it to him via LINE. I also added, "This isn't something people use in everyday conversation, so please don't say dattebayo when talking with Japanese people." That was the moment when I felt this exchange was going to be fun.

Chen-kun is an incredibly motivated and positive international student. From the very beginning, he showed real enthusiasm for learning Japanese, and that attitude has never changed. I always try to meet international students' wishes as much as possible when it comes to exchange activities, and in his case, he asked to meet twice a week. Unless he had university classes or wasn't feeling well, he never missed a session. That's how dedicated he is. Thanks to that effort, he passed the N1 exam, and on top of that, he received a job offer from his first-choice company in Japan. To be honest, even I found the interview practice quite tough—but he took it seriously every single time. His commitment was impressive, and it really paid off.

From my point of view, his Japanese has reached an amazing level. His conversation skills and reading ability are both strong, and especially his speaking speed—it's no different from talking with a native Japanese speaker. He looks for study materials on his own, buys two copies of the same textbook, and gives one to me so that we can study together. By now, he has given me a total of six textbooks, most of which focus on conversation practice. When he asks a question that I can't explain well on the spot, I look it up later and follow up by LINE, email, or during our next session.

The dictionaries I use for this exchange are an elementary Japanese dictionary and Kojien, both commonly used by elementary school students preparing for junior high school entrance exams.

When I send messages via LINE or email, I sometimes use everyday, easy-to-understand language, a more polite version, and occasionally a masculine way of speaking because he wishes to learn polite, humble, and honorific forms. He told me he copies them into his notebook. The reason for his improvement in Japanese lies here: His diligence.

I believe he will continue to forge his own path through his efforts and hard work. When we first started the exchange, we met in person, but now we meet twice a week via Zoom at night. Still, we occasionally meet in person for lunch or tea. For lunch, we almost always have the beef tongue set meal we both love—he always orders it with grated yam. It's delightful to see him enjoy it so much. We catch up on recent events over meals. On Valentine's Day, I give him chocolate; he is so gentle and always appreciates it. Also, whenever he travels for trips or conferences, he kindly chooses souvenirs for me. That makes me incredibly happy.

My wish is for all international students who choose Japan among the many countries in the world to enjoy their time here. Even after they return to their home countries, I hope they will remember their days in Japan fondly. I wish all international students good health and happiness.

Reflection on My Exchange with Kana-san

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I first met Kana-san (At Ms. Asaka's request, I call her "Kana-san") in the autumn of 2023. That year, I decided that I wanted to work in Japan. But the thing I worried about the most was my Japanese ability. I had entered the University of Tokyo through an English-based entrance exam, and my supervisor was from the UK, so my everyday communication was almost entirely in English. Because of that, I had very few opportunities to practice Japanese, and honestly, my motivation to study the language wasn't very strong.

Later, due to several reasons, I firmly decided that I wanted to pursue a career in Japan. Then a new challenge appeared: How could I improve my Japanese conversational skills? Through a friend, I learned that the University of Tokyo had a one-on-one conversation exchange program, so I applied. The administrative staff was very kind and told me by email, "We'll contact you once we find a volunteer."

Soon after, I received another email informing me that an external volunteer was available and inviting me to meet her. I was very happy but also extremely nervous. Although I had passed the JLPT N2, I had almost no experience speaking Japanese with native speakers. The JLPT only tests reading and listening, and since Chinese also uses kanji, I can sometimes guess meanings without studying the word beforehand. Because of this, even someone with the highest level, N1, might not actually be able to speak Japanese well.

So before meeting the volunteer, I feared that my poor speaking skills would make her think, "It's too difficult to talk with him," and she might refuse to continue the sessions. Carrying this anxiety with me, I stepped into the classroom to meet Kana-san for the first time.

To my surprise, Kana-san was incredibly talkative, kind, and energetic. She never gave up on me just because I couldn't speak smoothly—instead, she made every effort to communicate using clear and easy Japanese. She listened patiently while I searched for each word, and she always helped by expanding the conversation. Thanks to her, I gradually became more relaxed, and the nervousness I felt when speaking Japanese slowly disappeared. I began to feel positive, thinking, "If I keep trying, I can definitely get better." All these changes were thanks to her.

After our first meeting, I finally asked something I had always been curious about: "In *Naruto*, the main character always says 'だってばよ'. What does that actually mean?" Kana-san looked surprised for a second and then burst into laughter. "Actually, I'm a *Naruto* fan too!" she said. I was really happy at that moment.

After that, we decided to practice every Tuesday and Friday. At first, I wasn't used to speaking Japanese with someone, so everything felt awkward. But every time, Kana-san listened

patiently to my clumsy sentences and kindly corrected my pronunciation and word usage. Thanks to her, I learned so much. In the beginning, I could only read dialogues from a textbook, but she never found it boring—instead, she carefully corrected each line with great care.

And then one day, I suddenly noticed that my Japanese speaking ability had improved bit by bit.

By early 2025, I was able to handle simple conversations and write short passages on my own. Our practice topics also became richer. I told her about my travel experiences in Japan, and she shared her personal stories with me. Through these sessions, I gained not only language skills but also learned from her the importance of sincerity and patience.

Kana-san helped polish my Japanese interview script and practiced interview questions with me again and again. Thanks to her support, I was eventually able to receive a job offer from a Japanese company. I truly believe it was her help that made this possible, and I am sincerely grateful.

Looking back on our time together, I feel that I gained not only a diligent and kind Japanese teacher but also a warm and genuine Japanese friend. From her, I learned not just Japanese, but also the kindness, warmth, and sincerity that characterize Japanese people. These experiences have become a precious treasure for me, and they continue to support me even today.



One-on-one interaction