

Jason Bonitsky



At GHS, I wasn't exactly known for my diligence in Spanish class. Spanish was interesting, sure, but that wasn't incentive enough for me to actually crack the textbook, make study flashcards, or listen to tapes in the language lab. In fact, sometimes I think that if I hadn't I spent so much time after class explaining to my teachers exactly why I had been late and what had happened to my homework, I would never learned much Spanish at all, and certainly not any advanced grammatical structures. (My excuses were rarely believed, but they were certainly

elaborate exercises in expressing myself in a foreign language.) Of course, I didn't realize it at the time, but those conversations outside of the classroom were my teachers' way of challenging me and checking up on how much I was actually learning, in spite of my poor study habits. They were very invested in the progress I was making, even if I never realized the importance of foreign language education (and thus never really applied myself fully) until many years later. Honestly, I undervalued the caliber of the education I had been receiving all along in Glastonbury. In college, I was so comfortable communicating in Spanish from my time at GHS, most of my professors assumed at first that I had learned overseas. Unlike many of my peers, I wasn't afraid to make mistakes (maybe too much so). After all, in Glastonbury, my teachers had been encouraging me to speak Spanish since I was in elementary school.

While at Georgetown, I was first a tutor, and later a program coordinator for the DC Schools Project, an ESL program for immigrant children in a low-income area of Washington DC . Knowing Spanish helped me to understand the problems the students I tutored had with adapting to English despite living in a Spanish-speaking household. Later, my Spanish was useful as a coordinator in solving problems encountered by the tutors I was placing in Spanish-only environments.

Since graduation, I've been teaching English at a public junior high school in rural Japan as a participant in the Japanese Exchange Teaching (JET) Program. Successful applicants to the JET program are not required to have studied Japanese or to have any Japanese proficiency before they come to Japan , but they have to show interest in the Japanese culture and language. Since coming to Japan I have become fluent in just 2 and-a-half years, which has made every facet of my life here much easier. All in all, I've picked up Japanese much faster than anyone else that I know. I can attribute my success to learning how to study foreign languages while I was still in Glastonbury.

In Japan , though, I found myself on the other side of the equation for the first time. Suddenly I was the teacher—with no formal training and very little ability to communicate in the native language of my Japanese students. To come up with lessons, I strained to remember the techniques my teachers used back when I was first learning Spanish in Glastonbury. Of course, in Japan the school system is very different (no homework, for one), and many of the things we did in school don't work over here. Still, more than any magic lesson plan, the positive way in which my own teachers encouraged my attempts to communicate in a foreign language was something I wanted to use in my classroom as well.

Stepping up my Japanese was the other area I had control over. Most Westerners in Japan make very little headway in Japanese without going to expensive schools and spending a lot of money. But the biggest thing I learned in Glastonbury was that a lot of learning a foreign language happens outside of the classroom. Textbooks are important—and I have a small mountain of Japanese textbooks that I've bought and used during my time here—but by speaking, reading, writing, and definitely making a lot of mistakes whenever I could, I've become fluent in Japanese in just 3 years. Not a day goes by where some part of my life, from watching TV to arguing with my girlfriend, isn't made easier because I can use a foreign language.

One of the most interesting experiences I've had here is serving as a volunteer interpreter for South American competitors and masters at the 2004 World Kyokushin Karate Kyokushin Union Karate Tournament in Shizuoka , Japan . Interpreting from Japanese to Spanish and back nearly gave me an aneurysm, since I hadn't had an opportunity to speak Spanish in the 18 months since I'd arrived in Japan . Despite an incredible headache that persisted for the entire four days, I managed to shepherd three Chileans, three Venezuelans, and a handful of Spaniards through an incredibly different culture from the one they are accustomed to.

If someone had told me in 1998 when I was a senior at GHS that I would be living in Japan and speaking fluent Japanese in 2005, I wouldn't have believed it. For that matter, four years later when I was a senior in college getting back my first ever Japanese quiz (I managed 9 points out of 20, I think) I wouldn't have believed it then either. But my experiences living abroad and the challenges I still face improving my Japanese every day have shaped me into a different person from who I was then. There are so many amazing things I could never have seen had I never left the US . Wherever I go from here (and I don't think Japan will be the last foreign country I live in), I plan to continue to make foreign cultures and foreign languages a big part of my life.

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