

Many people ask me, “Why do you have the last name Takahashi if you’re Brazilian?” Behind that question lies a story that spans three generations and has changed my life.

In 1931, my Japanese great-grandmother was only ten years old when she immigrated to Brazil by ship, a journey that took three months. She began a new life in a small village where many Japanese people lived. The community grew, and she eventually married and had children. Ten years later, my grandfather was born, and he would play an important role in our family’s story. Because my great-grandparents didn’t speak any Portuguese, they depended on my grandfather, who grew up in Brazil, to be their interpreter. He became their voice in a foreign land. Years passed, and my grandfather started his own family. One of their children was my parent. That’s why I have the last name “Takahashi.” My roots are Japanese.

The story came full circle when my parents moved to Japan for work. I grew up here, receiving my education in Japanese schools, and soon I found myself taking on a familiar role, just like my grandfather before me. As a child, I quickly learned Japanese and became what I call a “little interpreter.” I have translated school handouts and many documents for my parents. Also, I have interpreted conversations between them and others. In a way, I am connecting my family to society.

Still, life is not easy. Although we speak Portuguese at home, I am not as fluent as my parents, and I often avoid using it. At times, I get frustrated when they ask me to share in Portuguese what happens at school every day when I spend all day speaking Japanese. It is difficult for me so we have less conversations. Sometimes this leads to conflicts but they patiently wait for me to sort out my feelings. That’s why I love them so much.

There are many “little interpreters” like me around you—children who help their families bridge cultural and language gaps. To all of them, I want to send a message: Yes, interpreting for our parents can feel annoying or even like a waste of time but it is also a chance to learn and to grow. Whether it is translating documents, or interpreting conversations, all of those are good for you. You gain knowledge, develop problem solving skills, build relationships, and see the world from different perspectives. I remember when I interpreted my mother’s words to important people at her work event. At that time, I was impressed by the possibility of working as an interpreter who can use it as a tool to help others and convey feelings clearly.

As I try to become fluent in Portuguese, Japanese and English, I understand this journey is not just about me but also my family’s legacy. From my great-grandmother who left Japan for Brazil, to my grandfather who translated for his parents, to me interpreting for mine, our family story has always been about communication and connection. I know I am not alone—there are many “little interpreters” around the world. Our struggles are real, but so are the opportunities to learn, grow, and build bridges between people. One day, I hope to use my languages not only for my family but also to connect cultures and help create a kinder, more understanding society.

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The Little Interpreters