

I have taken English for many years now. It has become my favorite subject and I'd like to say that I'm good at it. Some of my classmates even call me "sensei" when they need help with English. So, I was really excited when I had the chance to go to Australia, because I was pretty confident with my English skills. The program I was going through had a buddy system where one Japanese student would be paired with one Australian student. I expected my buddy to be eager to speak English with me and to become my best friend.

My buddy's name was Jordana, a shy girl one year older than me. She didn't speak much and when I asked her questions, she would answer simply and our conversation would die out. I wondered, was my English difficult to understand? Did I keep saying things that were unthoughtful? As our conversations were overcome with awkward silences, I began to worry more and more. At the same time, I began to lose confidence in my English and in starting conversations. That was the reality of my first day with my buddy in Australia—it was nothing like what I thought it would be.

I didn't want my next three days to be a repeat of my first day. So, I tried to think of a solution. Then it came to me—so what if my English wasn't perfect. If I could not connect to her through just English, I could at least connect to her with my feelings. Maybe when I had spoken with Jordana earlier, I had focused so much on speaking perfect English that I had come off as unfriendly. The solution was so simple. I would do my best to help her understand that I was trying hard to make a connection with her without only relying on English. I would actively engage her in any kind of conversation and enjoy the chance to speak with a foreigner!

So, the next day, I gathered up all my courage and tested out my solution. I showed her photos of my home and school in Fukushima. I asked her and told her everything I could think of. I wanted to show her that I was trying hard to share things about myself and that I wanted her to do the same. I feared rejection, but as Jordana looked through my photos with interest and listened to me speak, she grinned widely. She began to tell me about her own life and about Australia. As we spoke more and more, we grew relaxed and were even able to have long silly conversations. We had finally connected and become close!

Even though we all speak different languages, we're all still human. The important thing is to express yourself and to realize that communication is like building a bridge to another person. When I went to Australia, I assumed that all I needed was a little English. However, I found that speaking English was different from actually communicating with people. You shouldn't be afraid of saying what you want to say and expressing yourself in any way that you can—whether that be through your smile or wild gestures. I also have been able to use this knowledge not only when meeting other foreigners but when meeting Japanese people just like me. Because even though we can speak Japanese to each other, they are just words unless we put our feelings and emotions behind them. So now, my challenge to you, is not only to speak words, but to communicate with your heart.

Thank you.