

特別賞	鈴木 杏奈さん 日本女子大学附属高等学校 3 年	神奈川県
エッセイでは、日本語ボランティアとして多様な学習者と向き合う中で得た気づきについて綴りました。		

You Can't Play Catch Alone!

I used to be afraid of silence. Whenever a conversation became quiet, I immediately felt that something was wrong. This was the problem I faced when I started volunteering as a Japanese language tutor for foreigners living in Japan. I believed that my job was to make a supportive environment by keep talking. I asked plenty of friendly questions such as food, family, culture and more. Thankfully, the students kept answering my questions, so I thought I was doing pretty well. However, I eventually learned that true communication is not about filling silence, but about giving the other person enough time.

One normal Thursday, I was in charge of a man in his 60s. Everything went pretty well until that moment. During a ten-minute break, he asked me how old I was. This was a common question for me to be asked, so I just answered, "I'm 17." Since there are many volunteers in their 50s and 60s, many students want to know my age. Every time people asked me this question, they gave me positive comments like "Wow, you are so cool!". I expected the words like this from him as well, but instead, he teased my age. He had been answering my questions, and we kept talking. "What did I do wrong?" I kept asking myself these questions again and again, while my student stared at the other group jealously.

It took me a month to figure out my mistake. Our volunteer group had a meeting soon after that day, so I decided to talk about my worry to one of my mentors, who knew my style of teaching. She suggested me to stop asking too many questions. To be honest, I've been convincing myself avoiding silence is a key to keep a cozy atmosphere. I couldn't understand why I needed to decrease the questions then. Even so, I decided to listen to her advice. I no longer asked too many questions. At the beginning, I was scared that we might end up in silence. However, I was totally wrong. They

started to ask me questions! They were not fluent, but they were trying. They were being creative! That was the time when I began to understand my mistake.

Some people say that communication is like “playing catch”. I had known about it since I was a little. However, I was mistaken. The thing I used to do was “throwing a ball” and not “playing catch”. Since the students answered my questions, I assumed that they would throw a ball back to me. Sadly, I was wrong. I threw a ball, and they caught it. But instead of letting them throw a ball back to me, I threw another ball. I didn’t give them a chance to throw it back. That’s why I barely received questions from them.

By giving them time, the situation changed dramatically. I stopped asking a lot of questions. I still ask some questions, but I’m trying to get a question from them. I realized that I didn’t need to hurry. They can spend some time to think what they want to say in Japanese. I realized that this process is the most important part of communication. You need to give them some time to throw a ball back to you, just like you do in P.E. class. When your friend is not ready to throw it back, you need to wait. That is exactly the same with communication.

This process is important for everyone you talk to. It doesn’t matter if that person is a beginner at the language or not. Communication would never happen without another person, just like you can’t play catch alone! Don’t throw too many balls. Just wait. It may take some time, but they will throw it back to you. And when they do, that is true communication.