

Mistakes are Beautiful

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Hello, everyone! I'm James Davis from the United States, the new ALT at the Tokushima Prefectural General Education Center. I'm technically in my second year of the JET Program, but I've recently celebrated my one-year anniversary of my arrival in Tokushima and, as should be expected of one moving to a new country and learning a new language, I've made many, many mistakes in my time here.

It took me a few weeks to figure out that I wasn't asking for a plastic bag at the grocery (fukuro), but a "bukuro," which isn't a word at all. I had heard in the context of a glove (te-bukuro, or hand-bag, translated literally) and it had sounded similar to me, so I'd just gone on to use that. Pair that with the fact that I couldn't read the labels on the packaging, and you have a foreign recipe for a poor Kyoei employee's nightmare in their attempts to help me. I also purchased the wrong train tickets despite the best efforts of the kind gentleman I met my first time at Itano Station, who fumbled through a Japanese explanation of how to buy tickets that I half understood. I ended up buying three additional tickets that I didn't need, but on the bright side, I was able to save them for a later trip.

The one instance that sticks with me the most, however, is the time I accidentally terrorized the clerks at the Japan Post Office by messing up my name in katakana, not once, but six times, leading to them having to print the same form seven times. It's very easily the most I've felt like a foreigner in my time here in Japan and the most embarrassed I've been in quite some time.

Flash forward a year and I've mastered the arts of asking for a plastic bag when buying groceries, purchasing the correct train tickets, and writing my name correctly, and while those are small things, overcoming them was a triumph all the same. It felt great being able to clear my hurdles. Those mistakes I made last November have only strengthened my Japanese learning by reinforcing knowledge of what I shouldn't be doing. If I hadn't made them, I would have surely made them further down the line.

Mistakes like these are key to language learning, and as such we as teachers should make sure that our students know it's okay to make them. While it isn't a one-to-one comparison, it's like touching the hot stove to learn that you probably shouldn't touch the hot stove. You can't learn and grow if you don't fail, and our students should be able to get that feeling of success when they overcome their own hurdles. If we can make our students more comfortable with mistakes, they'll be more likely to take risks and push themselves in their language adventure and reach greater

heights. The more risks they take, the more mistakes they make, but with every one they've learned something new.

The beautiful thing about language is that it's a subject based on communication and understanding. We don't necessarily need perfect grammar to communicate, so long as the other party can understand. If one of my students asks me, "James, have you ever played homework," a question I have in fact received before, it isn't technically correct, but I *understand* what they meant. They had a general idea of what they wanted to ask, and they were able to communicate it, and that's a positive. As their teacher we can take their idea and help them shape it into something more cohesive and specific, but we must take care not to discourage them.

This is why intentional errors can be a boon in the classroom. You can take an opportunity to make an error that even a language learner can point out and turn it into a learning opportunity. A few weeks ago, I had a lesson asking my students where they would like to go and what they'd like to do there. While giving some examples of what you can do in Hawaii, I happened to make a "mistake" and mentioned that you can eat a delicious "Pokémon," which certainly got some attention. The class was in an uproar. Surely James-sensei didn't eat Pokémon! I asked my students to explain what I did wrong by using the information in my presentation: they told me I could eat a poke *bowl*. Now my students can tell me what a poke bowl is, and it only cost me a couple minutes of having to reassure exasperated high schoolers that Pikachu isn't a part of my regular diet. If my students had never misheard me say the sentence, "eat a Pokémon," I would have never gotten to explain to them that I don't eat Pikachus, they never would have internalized what a delicious poke bowl is, and we all would have been robbed of the experience in the first place. I did this in hopes that, after seeing their teacher make such a silly mistake, they would be less hesitant to make their own in the future.

Of course, the goal in our students' education is to get them to a point where they're no longer making mistakes. We should always be there to correct them. But we should act not like a stiff railroad, but a gentle guideline. If we restrict them too much, they run a greater risk of losing their curiosity and ability to express themselves. Keep them on the right path but let them step off and explore just a little. The mistakes they make in the classroom will be much less disruptive than my awkward grocery runs or disastrous post office visits. They should be allowed that freedom. Language is not firm like a science or mathematic field, but fluid. It's always changing, and almos are usually not the end of the world.

We, as teachers, owe it to our students to make learning accessible and engaging. We shouldn't be preventing them from using language to express themselves, even if it isn't completely correct. So let them stumble. There's no harm in it as long as we're there to dust them off and help them find the right answer after.