

Barbara Chen

First and foremost, I want to thank J.LIVE Talk and all of the sponsors for giving me this wonderful opportunity. Participating in J.LIVE was one of the highlights of my college years, and attending the Naganuma Language School was also an unforgettable experience. I am so grateful that J.LIVE gave me a stage to talk about something so important to me, and I am so excited to all of the future participants who will get to enjoy this incredible experience!

Brief Overview:

Overall, my time at the Naganuma Language School was very positive. In fact, even before going to Naganuma, I felt that they were happy to have me at the school. A few months before going to Naganuma, I was welcomed by the principal (then vice principal) via email and a quick Skype call. She congratulated me on winning the contest, and briefly introduced herself, the teachers, and the staffs. She gave me the contact for a staff



in the Naganuma School whom I could talk to regarding living in Japan. They answered a lot of my questions and helped me arrange my accommodation. They even went as far as helping me rent my bedding so I did not have to worry about that upon arrival. I really appreciated their help and hospitality, and it made me feel as if I was already part of the school even before officially attending.

I attended the Naganuma Language School from end of May to mid-July. Due to scheduling conflicts on my end, I attended four weeks of the spring semester and two weeks of the summer semester. I lived in a share house in Sangenjaya, which was about a twenty-minute bus ride from the school.

My Class:

My class had 7-8 students, so it was easy to get to know everyone. During the spring semester, we had students from India, Thailand, Korea, and Taiwan. I was the only student from the West. In the summer semester, all of the students were from Taiwan. My classmates and teachers were extremely friendly, so even though I joined the class in the middle of semester, I never felt out of place. One thing I loved about Naganuma was that my teachers always had a smile on their face and always appeared to be interested in what we had to say. The atmosphere was rather relaxed, and as a result, it created an enjoyable learning environment. In class, everyone had the opportunity to talk, and we often joked and laughed with each other.



One major difference between classes in Naganuma and my Japanese classes back in the US was the student background. The students at Naganuma were at different stages of their life and were studying for different reasons. A few of my classmates were already on their career path, and they were studying while working. One was learning Japanese to prepare graduate school in Japan. Others were learning Japanese to improve because they wanted to live in Japan. It was interesting to hear their experiences and opinions on various topics, and it was refreshing to be able to study with people at different stages of their life.

Learning Japanese:

I was placed in the E1 class, which was the highest level for the general course. Since I was in the general course, the curriculum was well rounded and targeted all aspects of learning a foreign language. We had a main text that was usually taken from a book, and we focused on it for about two weeks. Almost everyday, we will read a portion of the text, dissect every paragraph, and learn about the grammar structures or phrases used in said paragraph. As we read the text, we also had discussions in which we shared our opinions and experiences relating to the content. The next day, we will review the text covered in the previous day in the beginning of class.



In my Japanese classes in the US, we were not able to cover the readings in such detail due to time constraints. As a result, sometimes I could get a general understanding of the text but not comprehend it fully. At Naganuma, however, I felt that I had fully understood what I have read by the end of the text. I plan to use this strategy to improve my reading skills when I read Japanese books at my own time.

In addition to reading, we had different forms of listening exercises as well. Sometimes, we listened to audiotapes of real interviews in which people spoke in natural Japanese. For me, this was difficult because the people speaking did not always pronounce words clearly, or they would not finish a sentence as the other person would interrupt. On top of interviews, we watched segments of the news or TV programs. This allowed me to not just listen, but also use context and visual clues for comprehension. Listening is one of my weakest skills, so even though these activities were sometime very difficult, I think they were the most beneficial.



On top of listening and reading exercises, we also had writing exercises. In the second semester, we had lessons for writing emails in Japanese. Prior to Naganuma, I did not know about Japanese email etiquette or the standard email format. It turns out that writing formal emails in Japanese requires was more than just writing something in Japanese. For example, there are specific phrases that should almost always be included (お世話になっております、よろしくお願いたします、etc.).

We also learned phrases commonly used in emails but not in everyday speech. Furthermore, we had to pay extra attention to using polite speech the level of respect when writing emails. Unfortunately, I only stayed for two weeks for the summer semester, so I did not get to learn this in more detail. Nevertheless, I still think these lessons were some of the best because they were very applicable.

There was a field trip day each semester. I really enjoyed these events because it was a rare opportunity to talk with my classmates and teachers outside of a classroom setting. In the spring semester, we visited Yamato Chronogate, which is one of the main shipping facilities for the delivery company Kuroneko Yamamoto. In the second semester, our class decided to attend an Edo furin (Japanese glass wind chime) workshop at local furin store. Everyone in the class got to blow the glass, and we also got to paint our own furin. This was such a fun experience as we got to talk to the owner and workers of the workshop, and they did not hesitate to joke about our failed attempts at blowing glass. Traditionally, edo-furin should have some sort of summer theme to it as it is commonly used in the summer. However, as a huge lover of boba tea, I painted my furin as a cup of boba milk tea. Everyone loved it and thought it was the most ridiculous thing. This field trip was actually the last day of my class at Naganuma, so it was a little bittersweet :(

Outside of Naganuma:

Fortunately, I had made a few Japanese friends when I was in the U.S., so I was able to catch up with them during my summer in Tokyo. One of my friends invited me to see an



ice skating show in Kobe called “Fantasy on Ice.” This show featured some of the top figure skaters in the world, including my idol Hanyu Yuzuru. To meet the one and only Hanyu Yuzuru, I took a weekend trip down to Kobe to see the show – I was not disappointed. During that same trip, I also went to Osaka to visit a friend and, of course, tried a lot of Kansai foods. In Tokyo, one of the most memorable places I visited was TeamLab Planets in Toyosu, Tokyo. It is an “art exhibition/museum”

that features “Body Immersive” artworks. It is really an experience that is difficult to describe, as I have never been to a place that was so creative and mesmerizing. It is a place I would not hesitate to visit again, and I would recommend it to anyone who visits Tokyo.

Things I would do differently:

One of the things I did not do before coming to Japan was to make a bucket list. I figured that there is always something to do in Tokyo, so I did not really need to plan for anything. In reality, I was overwhelmed by all Tokyo had to offer that I essentially did not do much for the first couple of weeks. I think I also went through a phase of culture shock, which contributed to my lack of social interaction in the beginning. This was a struggle that I did not anticipate, but it did gradually go away once I started forcing myself to be active. Before coming to Japan, I was so eager to live in Tokyo and attend the Naganuma Language School that I was completely blindsided by my own excitement.

As a result, when I was going through the more difficult times, I had no idea how to react to the situation, and I just felt lost. From my experience, I think it is important to anticipate the difficulties of living abroad alone and mentally prepare oneself for the those moments. Although it was difficult to adjust to the new living environment, being able to go to class and knowing that I will enjoy class helped me tremendously.

Final Thoughts:

I am currently living in Tokyo right now, so luckily for me, I have been able to meet up with my classmates and teachers a few times even after leaving Naganuma. I am so grateful that the friendships I made lasted more than the six weeks I was there, and I am sure whoever gets to go next summer (hopefully you!) will have even more fun than I did. This opportunity was truly once in a lifetime for me, and I am so thankful for J.LIVE Talk for making this possible.

