

EPISODE 4 TRANSCRIPT

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Shizuoka Speaks, based in Shizuoka City, in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan.

I'm Sonia Paul, the host of this series. Here, we learn why where you come from matters when learning Japanese, English, or any other language. And we look at how people who come from different countries relate to each other in a country where being a foreigner is not that common...

Last week, we discussed how students from different countries learn.

And before that, we talked with some foreign students about what it's like to study Japanese in Japan.

But what about students who have roots in both another country AND Japan? What's it like for them to maintain their two cultures while living and studying in Shizuoka?

That's our topic for today.

First, we'll talk with Jyouji. Remember him from our first episode? He's half Chinese, half Japanese and spent much time studying at an international school in China before starting junior high in Japan. Because of his parents' jobs, his family is literally divided in half between the two countries.

Jyouji: My mother, my father, and me, my younger brother, and I have a sister. She is three years old. My mother is a hair designer...helps cutting hairs. She has a company in Beijing, so she works there, and my younger sister is over there. So...I can't meet my mother...we..yeah. And...now I am living with my brother and my father. And my grandfather came from China to visit us and just help us, also. Because we, we got three mens in our house, and we can't do anything! So, it's...it's a big family, but we got a hard time in Japan.

Sonia: What was it like for you to move to different places?

Jyouji: The good thing is I can meet many friends and can study many languages. But the bad thing is I--the friends that, my best friends I've got, I've lost my best friends--I've lost a lot of my best friends. That's a bad thing for me.

Jyouji often travels to Beijing during school holidays to visit his family there. He's fluent in both Chinese and Japanese; he was able to study both languages while he was at the international school. So he has actually avoided one of the biggest obstacles in adjusting to a Japanese school setting: the language.

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This is not the case for most other students...

Kotomi: My name is Kotomi Matsumoshita, I am living in Yaizu City, and now I am, oh, 24 years old.

Kotomi graduated from the University of Shizuoka with a degree in International Relations in 2008. Her hometown, Yaizu City, is not too far away from Shizuoka City. While she was a university student, she used to volunteer to teach foreign and bicultural students Japanese.

Kotomi: But of course, the students, they don't know how to speak Japanese, they don't know how to study in Japan. So first of all they have to study Japanese language. But...mm. it's so hard, ne. In the junior high school, we have to learn kanji--more than two thousand chinese letters for three years. (laughs) So, most of the kids who just came to Japan and just studied Japanese language, they cannot study with other Japanese students. So they need really help. So I was a volunteer from the University of Shizuoka, going to...those kind of junior high schools...which have...foreign students.

According to Kotomi, the plight of children who need to learn the Japanese language to survive in school is not something most Japanese people know about.

But it's an issue that 15 year old Natsumi knows all too well.

Natsumi: My name is Natsumi. I'm from Philippines.

Natsumi is half Filipino, half Japanese. She lives with her mother, who is from the Philippines. They came to Shizuoka when she was ten years old. Before then, they had been living near Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Natsumi has an older sister, who now lives in Aichi prefecture in Japan, and a grandmother who still lives near Manila. She has never met her father, who is a Japanese citizen.

We met at her junior high school last spring.

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Sonia: Why did you move to Japan?

Natsumi: Because...to study. To study Japanese and help my mother. Because my grandma is...health...yea.

Sonia: What languages did you speak in the Philippines?

Natsumi: Tagalog and...English.

Indeed, English is one of the two official languages of the Philippines. The other one is Filipino, which is the standard form of Tagalog, one of the main languages.

Natsumi started learning English when she was in elementary school in the Philippines. Living in Japan, she still likes it. In fact, in 2009, she entered an English speech contest. The topic of her speech? How she learned Japanese when she first moved to Shizuoka.

Natsumi gave us permission to play a recording of one of her practice sessions for the speech contest. The quality is not that great; you can hear teachers copying papers in the background. But you can hear what Natsumi has to say:

I was born in Japan, but I lived in the Philippines until I was ten. When I returned from the Philippines, I couldn't understand Japanese at all. The saddest thing for me was to study alone in the classroom while my classmates were studying together. Sometimes we studied in a group, but I couldn't share my ideas with my friends in Japanese. I found other students getting irritated because of our language barrier. I felt lonely and all I could say was, "I'm sorry."

I was eager to express myself in Japanese, so I decided to study Japanese harder at a school for foreign students. Whenever I felt sad, my sister always encouraged me and said, "Try and try until you succeed." I read Japanese comics to learn. However, the language used for the comics was for boys. When I spoke in Japanese, my teacher said, "You sound like you're a boy. Don't use those words!" Everyone laughed at me, but I didn't care a bit! I could learn the right words.

Natsumi is much more confident with her Japanese now. And she's motivated to learn more English too. But it's hard for her to balance her Filipino and Japanese cultures.

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Sonia: So, which language do you like the best?

Natsumi: Tagalog...Because I'm, I'm born in Philippines.

Sonia: Are you most comfortable when you speak Tagalog?

Natsumi: Yes!..

She sounds happy to speak Tagalog. But there's also sadness there.

Natsumi: When I speak Tagalog, I'm always thinking my grandma.

Sonia: What about when you speak Japanese?

Natsumi: When I speak Japanese, I'm...like...I am same with my friends.

Natsumi is bicultural. But one of the things about bicultural or bilingual kids is that they'll often assume one of their cultural identities more than another, depending on the context. And they'll often take on the language appropriate to that context too. This is called code-switching.

For example, just now, Natsumi said that she prefers Tagalog. That's BECAUSE....

Natsumi: ...because I am born in Philippines.

But listen closely. In her speech for the Japanese speech contest, she said this:

Natsumi: I was born in Japan, but I lived in the Philippines until I was ten.

Did you catch that?

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AMBI: Philippines/Japan

I am born in Philippines...

I was born in Japan...

Now, we're not trying to call Natsumi a liar here or anything!

The thing is, almost every member of the audience for that speech contest was Japanese. And when bicultural or bilingual kids engage in code-switching, the way they see the world may also change--it all depends on what language they're using.

So when Natsumi speaks before a Japanese audience and says she's born in Japan, she probably really means it. But Natsumi also told me that she speaks Tagalog with her mother at home. So when she said just now that she was born in the Philippines...she probably really means that as well.

Essentially, she has two identities. And whatever context she's in determines the identity that comes out.

Of course, Natsumi could have also just made a mistake in word choice. Perhaps when she said "born," she really meant "from"--as in she is "from" the Philippines.

But there's something else to think about as well....something that you know exists, but you don't often hear about or witness firsthand.

Natsumi: Because I can't speak Japanese very well..then they call me like, Philippine-jin. They didn't call me Japanese, Japanese people, yeah.

Sonia: Even now?

Natsumi: My friend--other people say, you're half, why...why're you're here, get out, like that, but my friends, they didn't say.

Yeah. Discrimination.

But everyone always talks about how kind Japanese people are. So why might discrimination exist in a country like Japan?

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Again, here's Kotomi.

Kotomi: In Japanese, we call "kugiotsu." kugi--the pin. with the hammer. kkkk... (making hammering noise)

Sonia: The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.

Kotomi: Yeah yeah. Something like that

"The nail that sticks out gets hammered down" is a common saying in Japan. It's more of a warning, actually--basically, don't try to be different. The Japanese don't like it.

Kotomi: So...if you enter the junior high school, it is banned for having the pierced or it's very shameful thing for Japanese people to do different thing from others. So this is our basic feeling when we were in schools. So being same...that is kind of our virtue. So we can communicate well with other people. So that is our culture. Sometimes good, sometimes bad.

And ..If there is foreign students. Of course, completely different. Now, young generation... when I was a volunteer in the junior high--and my students was two Filipino and one Chinese, and...of course, the appearance, especially Filipino people--is different from other Japanese students. So...still, some people...kind of discriminate the foreign students, but...maybe that is already different from my generation. Compared with old time, we can see many foreigners on tv, many foreigners in the town, so much more closer, the different cultures. So maybe now, young people, junior high or elementary. Some students, they are so...familiar to communicate with other? Like half or foreign students. But...in general, our virtue in the school, that is being same. Yeah. To cooperate with others. (chuckles) Yeah, that is cause of discrimination in school.

When we were talking, Natsumi didn't really go into much detail about any more prejudice she'd experienced. And I didn't ask, either. I could tell it was a hard subject for her to talk about. But she did want to say this to the people who used to tease her:

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Natsumi: I want to say that I'm not...a Filipino..I'm half Japanese. And, I want to say...I can understand what they speaking in Japanese, because I can speak Japanese, yea...and...hmm....I wish that they understand me. Yea..Mmm...

Discrimination is definitely a hard issue to deal with, especially because it's so personal. But Natsumi hasn't let these experiences get her down. She has high hopes for the future.

Natsumi: I want to be a singer because I like singing, and...I help my mother to come back in Philippines.

Sonia: What language will you sing in?

Natsumi: Japanese, Tagalog, English...

Sonia: What kind of singer do you want to be? Like love songs, pop songs...

Natsumi: Rock...I want to be like Avril Lavigne...

Sonia: Really? Why Avril Lavigne?

Natsumi: Because..she is very pretty, and...yea...she is very..very good singer....

Yes, you heard right. She may not be the most famous singer in North America, where she is from, but in Japan, Avril Lavigne is extremely popular.

Thank you to Natsumi, Kotomi, and Jyouji. Next week--more about studying English in different parts of Asia. I'm Sonia Paul. Thank you for listening to Shizuoka Speaks.