

A Smile Has No Language Barriers

I moved to Japan from the Philippines in my second year of middle school. I was really excited to start my new life here in Japan; excited for a new school, a new environment and new friends. But it wasn't what I expected it to be. Unable to master the language or culture, I felt so out of place. I struggled, and had mental breakdowns.

One day, while I was on my way home, I passed by the gymnasium. I saw the volleyball club practicing and I was amazed by their passion. I wanted to be a part of it. So the next day, I talked to my homeroom teacher about joining the club and became a member the day after.

However, this became yet another challenge. Communicating on the court was difficult as I wasn't able to speak and understand Japanese well. Not only that, but I had never played volleyball before! I couldn't understand what was happening on two levels—the sport, and the language my teammates were speaking.

So, I started to rely on a new language: the language of gestures, touch, expressions and tone.

When I missed a ball, I raised my hand and nodded instead of pronouncing the difficult Japanese words my teammates used. Whenever a problem happened on the court, my teammates and I showed each other everything is okay by smiling. When stretching before games, I could copy my teammates' body movements and join the rhythm naturally. We all laughed and high fived each other when we got a point. Day by day, I began to feel connected to the team. I realized that not being able to speak Japanese well didn't matter!

Through volleyball, I came to understand how powerful sports can be. When playing a sport, you can participate fully and learn from watching and copying body movements even if you don't share a language with your teammates. Sports' rules are also universal, and you can enjoy playing no matter where you are in the world. For example, in volleyball, a hand down means that a ball is in bounds, and a hand up means that it is out of bounds. Two fingers up from the referee means "double contact"—If the same player touches the ball twice the other team gets a point. Every sport has its own rules and its own language of nonverbal communication. This language allows us to build friendship and closeness through few words.

Today, most major professional sports teams have foreign players. In America, Shohei Ootani is the hottest topic in baseball, and the fact that he doesn't speak English fluently has not stopped him. In Japan, fifteen of Japan's national rugby team players were born outside Japan. Team sports can even overcome the deepest divisions. In 1914, during World War I, groups of British soldiers and German soldiers famously played football matches together on no-man's land, even though they had to fight each other the next day. With just a hand movement, a smile, or a friendly touch, the language and culture barriers fall away.

In the years since I moved to Japan, I have changed a lot. I know that if you communicate with respect and kindness, others will reciprocate that kindness to you, and later on, you can learn from them by sharing your own experiences and culture, too. The more you learn about a person, the more you can communicate and express yourself to them with ease. Most importantly, I understand that even if we don't speak the same language, we always have the innate human language of the body. I am much more used to the language and culture of Japan, so I don't rely on body language as much. However, I am thankful for it! When we cannot use our spoken language, movement is the tool we use to make ourselves understood, and it is a doorway to connection—to being a part of a team. [654 words]

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