

CET Japan, Spring 2024 | Carey Pope

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Older, low-income, or non-traditional background students who are hesitant of studying abroad"

Studying Abroad as a Non-traditional Student

Now being back in America for a few weeks, surrounded by friends and family, reintegrated back into my home culture—I can say, without a doubt, that my recent Spring semester abroad in Japan through CET was one of the most impactful experiences of my life, and I'm so glad I took the plunge. However, this is a far cry from what I thought it might be when I was first applying. Of course, I was excited to study a foreign language and the culture of a country I had long wanted to visit, but the prospect of studying abroad was a little terrifying, to say the least.

As a non-traditional low-income background student, who only started their college journey at 26, I've always felt slightly out of place when compared with my peers. While this has improved greatly, and I've now found my place to feel welcome heading safely into my senior year—feeling welcome in another country is a whole other issue all together. Not only would I have to rework through the previous issues all over, but this time in a country whose native language I'm not fluent in. In fact, when I had arrived in Japan, my listening and reading comprehension were only just past a beginner's ability with my conversational ability lacking far behind. And my language ability was even worse when I applied 8 months before arriving. If I couldn't hope to communicate effectively, on top of being a non-traditional student, how could I hope to have a successful semester abroad?

Thankfully, the amazing program through CET at Osaka Gakuin University (OGU) quickly assuaged my worries. I felt welcome right away when landing and meeting the staff, the native Japanese student volunteers, and my housemates. Even if I wasn't so confident in my speaking ability, they were all patient with my attempts (and understanding of my jetlag), and even willing to try and communicate in English if I couldn't say something in Japanese or was struggling. In fact, this was a trend that would continue the entire semester long, even still by the last few weeks—where I went from barely being able to follow along in a conversation, to being an active participant in Japanese able to hold my own conversations comfortably!

Of course, this didn't come without hard work, perseverance and dedication to my studies and the language pledge I had set for myself. And it didn't get easier every day. Some days I had no issues conversing entirely in Japanese, others it was all I could do to pick out a few words every sentence. But the CET staff, my housemates, my fellow study abroad students, and the native Japanese OGU students volunteering with CET always made it an easy, comfortable and welcoming environment to try. Whether I succeeded or failed in my language goals for any given day, I always felt welcome and encouraged despite my unique background.

While I could go on and on about the amazing memories I'll carry with me from this program (and hopefully back with me to Japan someday!), I'd rather share this. No matter your background, no matter your identity, if you want to study abroad then study abroad is for you. There will be pitfalls and challenges, and not everyday will be so easy and fun. But you'll find welcoming people excited to help if you look—and if you really want it, don't you owe it yourself to try?