

How do you say..



What would happen if you woke up one day and suddenly found yourself in a world where you could not communicate with anyone I am an English language teacher. In June 2004, I accepted a job in a rural area of Japan called Niigata and found myself faced with this language problem. One event in particular stands out as an example of my inability to express my ideas to the people around me due to my lack of vocabulary. I had been in Japan only a few days, and I was feeling restless. I wanted to make some fresh bread, so I set out for the store with the seemingly simple intention of buying some flour.

I had taken some Japanese language classes before I arrived in Japan. Although I knew my Japanese skills were limited, my lack of knowledge didn't stop me from going to the store to buy flour. I thought that I would locate the section where the grains were displayed and find the bag that had a picture of either bread or flour on it. The small town where I lived had only one tiny store. I wandered around the store a few times, but I did not see a bag of anything that appeared to be flour. In the United States, flour usually comes in a paper bag with pictures of biscuits or bread on it, so this is what I was looking for I finally found a few clear plastic bags that had bread crumbs inside, so I thought that flour might be located nearby.

No matter how many bags I examined, I could not find any flour. I desperately wanted to ask one of the three elderly women clerks where the flour was, but I could not do this simple task. I knew how to ask where something was, but I did not know the word for flour.

I tried to think of how to say flour using different words, such as white powder or the ingredient that you use to make bread, but I did not know powder and I did not know ingredient. Just then, I saw one of my students in the parking lot. I rushed outside to his car and explained that I needed to know a word in Japanese. "How do you say flour" I asked.

He quickly replied, "That's easy." He then told me the word was hana. I rushed back into the store, which was about to close for the evening. I found one of the elderly clerks and asked in my best Japanese, "Sumimasen. Hana-wa doko desu ka" or "Excuse me. Where is the hana" The petite old woman said something in Japanese and raced to the far right side of the store. Finally, I thought, "I am going to get my flour and go home to make bread." However, my hopes ended rather quickly when I followed the clerk to the produce section.

I saw green onions, tomatoes, and even pumpkins, but I could not understand why flour would be there. The woman then pointed to the beautiful yellow chrysanthemums next to the green onions. enough to know that people in Japan eat chrysanthemums in salads.

I was standing in front of the flower display, not the flour display. When I asked my student for the Japanese word for flour, I did not specify whether I meant flour or flower because it had never occurred to me that grocery stores, especially small ones, might sell flowers. I did not buy any chrysanthemums that night. I was not able to find the flour, either. My lack of knowledge about Japanese cuisine and my very limited knowledge of the Japanese language caused me to go home empty-handed that night.

However, I learned the often-underestimated value of simple vocabulary in speaking a second language. For me, this event in a small store in rural Japan opened my eyes to my lack of vocabulary skills.