

If I Was an American

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“So guys, why did Shakespeare start Hamlet with Bernardo’s line, ‘Who’s there?’” My English teacher asked us this question when I was studying in America, and all at once, students raised their hands and shared their opinions. I was the only one who didn’t answer. The same thing happened many times, because I usually didn’t have an opinion. I often didn’t want to go to class, because I’d only sit and listen to my classmates. My experiences taught me the importance of having and sharing my opinions

Outside of class, the 2012 Presidential election gave me another opportunity to think about having opinions. Some of the seniors were old enough to vote, and because debates and speeches were on TV nearly every day, the election became a common conversation topic at school. I was very surprised, since we don’t talk about things like that outside of class in Japan. If I was an American, I have been able to vote, but I probably wouldn’t have because I didn’t know much about politics. This is a big difference from my American friend who wanted to vote, but couldn’t because his birthday was a month after the election.

Last November, Japan’s House of Representatives was dissolved and an election was held. The turnout of voters in their 20’s was lower than 38%. This is a very serious problem, because politicians won’t care about young people if we don’t vote. I think that many young people don’t vote because they don’t have any interest in politics, or they don’t think their vote can change anything. To be honest, I also thought that way. Politics and the economy are difficult subjects, so I didn’t have any interest in them until quite recently.

Last summer, my friends and I created a team to compete in English debate contests. To prepare for the October debate, I did research using newspapers and the internet every day. I had to read many articles and most of them were about the politics of the topic. I started asking questions, like “why

does the Japanese government do this?” or “why don’t they do that?” And that led me to read and think about articles on topics other than that of the debate.

But despite that voting is a duty of all Japanese citizens, we can’t just be told, “You are 20 now. Go and vote.” We should make more opportunities for students to learn about politics, the economy, and the constitution. For example, American students learn about them in 8th, 11th, and 12th grades, compared to Japanese students who only get one year in junior high school, and another in senior high. I don’t want anyone to waste their chances to change Japan by not voting.

The exchange program, debates, and speech contests made me realize that not having my own opinions was a waste. We need to be able to study and think deeply about our world in order to have and share our opinions, and school is the best place to practice these skills. I really regret not being able to participate in class during the exchange program. If I could go back to that time, my answer would be “Shakespeare started Hamlet with the line, ‘Who’s there?’ because he wanted to show us the strain of the situation.