

# The Experience of Japanese Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education: An Investigation of The Challenges They Face in the Classroom

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**Abstract** *This paper explores the specific classroom challenges that graduate-level Japanese international students face in U.S. higher education, drawing on my dissertation, "Japanese international graduate students in U.S. higher education classrooms; an investigation of their pedagogical and epistemological challenges and supports." By highlighting the cultural and pedagogical differences, and the language problems that underlie these challenges, it aims to help: (1) faculty in U.S. institutions of higher education enhance their awareness of the difficulties faced by international students from any culture, but particularly those with a Japanese or Asian background; (2) faculty in Japan who are tasked with preparing Japanese students for study abroad.*

**Key Words:** Japanese graduate-level international students, intercultural communication, education, challenge

**Interdisciplinary Fields:** Education, Intercultural Communication, Cross-Cultural Psychology

## 1. Introduction

Globalization, both economic and technological, has allowed many more people to move between countries, and study abroad has become a common educational practice worldwide. Increasing numbers of universities in a wide variety of non-English-speaking countries are sending their students to those such as the United States to foster their English language skills and intercultural understanding which, for some, leads to the completion of a degree. Research in the past decade has focused on the impact of the American classroom environment in higher education on non-dominant groups such as international students (Cooper, 1983; Kaplan, 1987; Selvadurai, 1992; Light, 1993; Trice, 2001). Thompson and Thompson

(1996) showed that faculty members are not always familiar with ways to resolve the problems that international students present to them, and some reported being overwhelmed by these, especially in cases where international students did not ask for clarification, for example when they felt that assignments were unclear.

Students are equally frustrated; here is a description by an Asian international student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill of her experience in the classroom:

The teacher could have encouraged the students to accept other people's ideas. They should do that because the other students, maybe it's because of race, they don't want to welcome your ideas because maybe they think you're Asian, you're not a native speaker. I felt that sometimes I was set aside because I was not a native speaker. I don't think the teacher was aware [that he/she was shutting me out]. (The Center for Teaching and Learning, 2001)

This student wanted to connect with her teacher and her peers in class, and to be acknowledged and accepted by them. International students, especially in higher education, are adult learners. They bring with them their prior experience of the academic culture of their home country, and this sometimes can cause misunderstandings when they enter a higher education classroom in the United States. Some faculty members there do not recognize or acknowledge the challenges encountered by non-American students who have undergone a different undergraduate experience, often with its own set of tacit expectations (Albert & Triandis, 1994; Thompson & Thompson, 1996; Trice, 2003; Ward, Boschner, & Furnham, 2001). For the many international students, these challenges can lead to culture shock and eventually to great intercultural misunderstandings in American classrooms.

In this study, I focus on Japanese graduate-level international students (hereafter "Japanese students") because the literature suggests that Asian international students (hereafter "Asian students") face relatively more cultural adjustment challenges when studying in U.S. higher education classrooms than do, for example, many from Europe (Zang & David, 2001) or other non-European cultures (e.g. African) that may share similar classroom learning styles and interaction patterns in teacher-student and peer relationships. U.S. faculty members indicate that international students from Asian countries have problems particularly related to language (both vocabulary and communicative confidence), whereas students from European countries often arrive with a better command of English and some shared cultural patterns that allow them to develop relationships with American students more easily (Trice, 2001). As an

Asian country, Japan is culturally very different from the United States, and this lies at the root of the challenges its students face.

My aims in exploring Japanese students' classroom experience in U.S. higher education institutions here are; (1) to enhance awareness among U.S. faculty that will enable them to create a more supportive learning environment for students from Asian cultures; and (2) to help faculty members in Japanese universities and colleges tasked with preparing their students for study abroad. Drawing on my dissertation, "Japanese International Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education Classrooms: An Investigation of Their Pedagogical and Epistemological Challenges and Supports" (Yamashita, 2009), I will utilize intercultural communication concepts to explore the specific challenges that such students face.

## 2. Cultural Differences

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) explained that culture is a value-laden meaning system that helps us to make sense of what is going on and what we should do in our everyday surroundings. This creates problems in an intercultural setting. For example, members of a cultural group share a particular sense of identity and solidarity that cannot be transferred at all between cultures. And even where some such transfer is possible, it is seldom complete. Japanese and Americans, for example, share some similar values, such as the importance of honesty, but such values are manifested differently depending on context.

Culture is defined by a number of contexts. Bennett categorized culture as either objective or subjective; he defined the former as a visible social, economic, political, and linguistic system (including art, literature, drama, classical music, and so on), "the kinds of things that are included in area studies or history courses," whereas a "good working definition of subjective culture is the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people" (1998, p. 3). For Japanese students studying in American classrooms, it is the subjective cultural differences that pose the greater, indeed a huge, challenge; this can be illustrated by, for example, the gulf between low-context and high-context communication styles first described by Hall (1976).

In a high-context communication system, the listener is very sensitive to non-verbal cues in a given context, and so finds little difficulty with indirect verbal modes such as self-effacing talk, nonverbal subtleties, and interpreter-sensitive values. By contrast, in a low-context communication system, the listener is much less sensitive to such cues and so needs much more background information if communication is to be effective, which

necessitates direct verbal modes such as straight talking, nonverbal immediacy, and sender-oriented values (Hall). Thus, in a high-context society, "there is a heavy investment in socializing members so that information does not need to be explicitly stated to be understood," whereas in a low-context society, "information about rules and permissible behaviors are explicitly stated" (Gannon, 1994, p. 9).

In Hall's continuum (1976), Japan is to be found at the extremely high-context end, whereas the U.S. is at the opposite, low-context end, so that when Japanese students work alongside their American counterparts in the classroom, their very different communication styles collide and it requires substantial effort for Japanese students to make the transition to what is the norm in the U.S. system of education (they do, of course, face further challenges resulting from other cultural differences between the U.S. and Japan).

This general approach to the analysis of cultural phenomena needs to be used with caution, however. While the dichotomous classification of intercultural communication styles into high-context and low-context is both useful and important, this should not lead us to ignore the existence and significance of differences between the personalities of individual students. Nonetheless, grouping common elements together to form logical categories can provide us with a starting point when we seek to explain an individual's behavior in an intercultural communication context.

For this reason, using cultural traits like high-context communication styles (which depend heavily on nonverbal expressions), and low-context ones (which depends more heavily on verbal expressions) can help us in our discussion of the cultural misunderstandings that can arise in low-context American classrooms. This dichotomizing of the U.S. and Japan does not imply any criticism of American communication styles in a classroom context. It is used only as an objective conceptual framework to help us to explore Japanese students' experiences, and especially the challenges they face in U.S. higher education classrooms.

### **3. Culture Shock**

During the process of cultural transition, many international students encounter "culture shock," a term coined by the anthropologist Cora DuBois (as cited in Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004). Kalvero Oberg (1960) described culture shock as being like a disease, complete with symptoms of irritability, anger, hostility, indecision, frustration, unhappiness, sadness, and illness. Albert and Triandis (1994) elaborated on this, stating that when "individuals from one culture are forced to adopt a very different

cultural pattern [...] they are likely to experience high levels of stress, a reduction in positive outcomes, lower self-esteem, anomie, and general demoralization" (pp. 426-427). A considerable number of studies have also focused on this topic and on the cultural adjustment of international students in general (Adler, 1975; Albert & Triandis, 1994; Barna, 1983; Bennett, 1998; Oberg, 1960; Thompson & Thompson, 1996; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

As to its causes, Oberg described it as being precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. He articulated the wide variety of challenges that international students commonly face in the study-abroad adjustment process. These include: social isolation; lack of language skills; not knowing social norms; overcoming stereotypes; learning how to use transportation; adjusting to weather and food differences; making oral presentations; and managing personal finances. During the research for my dissertation (Yamashita, 2009), I encountered Yoshiko, aged 27 and a female student in the third year of a master's course in conflict resolution, who vividly described her own particular experience of culture shock. She said that she was discouraged from voicing her own opinions by a professor, and also felt that she was being stereotyped by her instructor. As she said:

When we were talking about the Israeli and Palestinian issue in a class, I tried to speak up and give my opinion, but my instructor cut me off and told me, "You are ASIAN! So you should focus on affairs between Japan and other East Asian countries, not problems between the Israeli and Palestinian."

She interpreted this incident as discriminatory because, as an Asian, she had tried very hard to join in the class discussion, but felt that her contribution on this occasion was not welcomed due to her nationality. At the time, this made her feel completely isolated. She said that the mindless approach or misplaced assumptions of faculty towards her were very painful to endure. Paige (1993) contended that among the stress factors that affect international students, being treated as invisible and being ignored in group settings is particularly upsetting. The culture shock Yoshiko experienced resulted in insomnia and the feeling of sometimes not wanting to go to class. Occasionally, before she went to sleep at night, memories of class discussions would come back to her mind, and upset her all over again. She felt frustrated at the fact that there were too many constraints in her in class; when, for example, somebody verbally attacked her or imposed Japanese stereotypes on her, she wanted to talk back to the person spontaneously, but found it was not easy to do so in English.

#### 4. Challenges that Japanese Students Encounter in U.S. Higher Education Classrooms

Hofstede (1997) argued that peoples' preferred modes of learning are shaped by their countries' culture through socialization. High-context cultures such as Japanese tend to use indirect and status-oriented styles of communication that are manifested in their class participation style; and they tend to be sensitive to nonverbal communication such as subtle gestures, voice, eye contact, spacing, and touching (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1999). The ways that this communication style is manifested were enumerated in a study by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995). They observed that in language learning, Japanese students tend to observe the class and reflect on their ideas before they speak up. It can be said that this learning style is shaped by their culture and represents a very different approach to the active and risk-taking nature of American learning and class participation style.

The U.S. class atmosphere may therefore appear culturally very uncongenial to Japanese students. As well as the obvious language problems, then, we need to focus on such cultural factors. As Wong (2004) pointed out, the "three main difficulties highlighted by Asian international students are *cultural differences*, *different learning styles*, and *language problems*" (p. 154). These three categories will be amplified here as follows: *cultural differences* are related to an unawareness of what is culturally appropriate in the U.S. and a lack of knowledge of American cultural reference points, and different attitudes towards professors in Japan and the U.S.; *different learning styles* also include differences in class participation practices between Japan and the U.S., both those that involve the student-professor relationship and peer relationships among students; while *language problems* refer in the main to lack of language proficiency. These modifications in no way reduce the scope of the difficulties that lead to great intercultural challenges for Japanese students in U.S. classrooms.

##### 4-1. Unawareness of What is Culturally Appropriate in the U.S. and Lack of Knowledge of American Cultural Reference Points

International students from most countries face challenges related to cultural differences, but my dissertation research revealed that Japanese students may experience more difficulties in American classrooms than others when it comes to being aware of what is culturally appropriate there and understanding American cultural reference points. Japanese students' participation in class discussion was limited by not knowing what is or is not appropriate to say and when to speak up, and this made them feel

isolated, like members of an out-group. Students have to know when to share their knowledge during class discussions, based on the accepted rules of interaction in the classroom. There are tacit rules about what one can say and when to say it, but not knowing these held Japanese students back from participating alongside others.

During the research for my dissertation (2009), I also encountered Takashi, aged 27, and a second-year male student pursuing a master's degree in the humanities, who shared his experience of not being able to speak up in class that was caused by not knowing if it would be appropriate. He said:

I was confused about whether it was the appropriate time to speak up or not in class and could not give [my opinion]...generally speaking, Japanese people tend to organize their thoughts and consider if it is appropriate to voice them in a particular context. When they are sure that it is all right to say something, they finally express their opinions...People here [in America] may not think as seriously as Japanese people do about the issue of the appropriateness of speaking in any given context.

People from Japan tend to be very concerned about social interaction (Ting-Toomey, 1999). In this instance, Takashi was considered very carefully what he wanted to say in class discussion and when and how to say it. He used sensitive guessing ability (*sasshi* in Japanese) to sense when and how to speak up in the class. In the end, he decided not to speak up because of self-inhibition (*enryo* in Japanese), which reduced his oral participation in class. He explained how he had to work through what he wanted to say beforehand, and through using the cultural filter of *sasshi* to examine his ideas so as to eliminate any messages that might disturb the atmosphere in the discussion, he missed opportunities to speak up. In this way, Japanese students' culturally biased *sasshi* and *enryo* seldom worked in the culture of the American classroom context appropriately and to his advantage.

International students in general, not having grown up in the U.S., lack the same knowledge of American cultural references as natives. But, this lack is even greater for Japanese students, especially in matters connected with the arts and history, or popular movies and TV dramas, which means that Japanese students are at an even more serious disadvantage than most international students when it comes to grasping the significance of common expressions, which faculty members and students bandy about in class. This can place real limitations on Japanese students' oral classroom participation. Another student who featured in my dissertation research (2009) was Hiroshi, aged 27 and a third-year male student pursuing a

doctorate in social science. He shared his experience of struggling in class due to such a lack of knowledge of American cultural references, saying:

Usually, discussion topics involved U.S. domestic issues...and I did not know how I could contribute to such discussions. My inability to participate in these was not because of a lack of [oral presentation] skills, but because I was baffled by American cultural references and that became a barrier to my contributing to what was being said. I really wanted people around me to understand [my situation], but I couldn't explain this.

Due to Hiroshi's lack of American cultural references, he was in a high uncertainty situation; he said that he hesitated to ask questions in class because he was often in the process of guessing what his classmates were discussing. "When uncertainty is above our maximum thresholds, we do not have confidence in our predictions and explanations of other people's behavior" (Gudykunst et al., 1995, p. 105). Therefore, it is understandable that Japanese students tend to hesitate to take the risk of asking what may turn out to be "stupid" questions; they fear that doing so may cause them to lose face as well disturbing the flow of class discussion.

#### **4-2. Different Attitudes towards Professors in Japan and the U.S.**

There is a second reason why Japanese students tend not to ask questions in classrooms. This is that they are afraid of causing their instructors to lose face. "Asking questions or speaking up in the middle of the lecture is considered inappropriate and disrespectful" (Liu, 2001, p. 195) by teachers and students in Asian schools. In research on the classroom interaction patterns of students in a community college composition course, Losey (1997) found that, out of politeness and respect for instructors and peers, no Asian students would participate in discussions even if they wanted to, while 81% of Anglo American students asked questions or otherwise participated.

Despite work that has shown that the cultural and learning style backgrounds of international students often do not mesh well with American practices in academic programs (e.g. Bennett, 1995), faculty in U.S. higher education institutions are sometimes not fully aware that such students do have different perspectives and learning styles (Trice, 2001; Weinstein & Obear, 1992). Chan (1999), for example, pointed out that Western educators still lack the understanding that Asian students generally tend to be less spontaneous and unlikely to make waves in the presence of their teachers. Japanese students in particular are perceived to "rarely debate issues in class, disagree with the opinion of a classmate or instructor, or challenge the status quo" (Thompson & Thompson, 1996, p. 55).

In Japanese classrooms, it is common for students just to listen to a professor's lecture. In contrast, in a U.S. classroom, students tend to be uncomfortable with silence and feel a responsibility to speak up to assist the professor. In this context, Japanese students' silence in the classroom is sometimes taken as showing an unwillingness on their part to participate, or as evidence that they have nothing significant to contribute (Liu).

#### 4-3. Differences in Classroom Peer Relationships in Japan and the U.S.

There is, however, a third reason why Japanese students find it difficult to speak out in U.S. classrooms. Generally speaking, American students participate very actively in discussions; indeed they are encouraged to do so. But, according to Liu (2001), American students, having been taught that in-class oral participation is important, can carry their enthusiasm for this to the point where they often end up monopolizing these discussions. Liu noted that Asian students can feel intimidated by the heated tone of the discussions being carried on by their American peers, and that this also results in their missing opportunities to speak up in class. Japanese students in particular may react negatively to such an aggressively direct manner of speech and overactive participation in class because they see all this as damaging to the preservation of relationships, which is the most important of all values in a high-context culture. Research for my dissertation (2009) brought to light the experience of Yoshiko, whom we have already met above, reported that she was overwhelmed by the competitive attitude of American students:

I have a hard time participating in class discussions in my program ...All of them have really strong opinions. They always see things as black or white. It is not a discussion, it is a debate...Everybody in my class is active and thinks that they are right. When others say a word, they try to shut them up.

Since Yoshiko felt uncomfortable when her peers directly expressed disagreement with her, she sometimes held back from speaking up in class. This reflects a common challenge faced by Japanese students. Nemetz Robinson stated, "The American value of directness is contrasted with the Japanese value of maintaining harmony. Japanese use a variety of conventions to avoid direct disagreement" (1988, p. 57). For this reason, Japanese students tend to be intimidated or even offended when their peers use a direct manner of speech when criticizing their opinions.

Harmony is not just important to Japanese students as an abstract value, however; it also matters a great deal because it is perceived as underlying individual friendships. Thus, Japanese students tend to hesitate about opposing the opinion of other students in class because they

fear it may damage or destroy friendships. They are very sensitive on this point; in Japan, even a slightly inappropriate phrase or nonverbal cue may ruin a friendship (Barnlund, 1989), and so Japanese people tend to take criticism of, and objections to, their ideas as personal attacks (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). They, therefore, find it very difficult to separate the issue being discussed from the relationships between those who are discussing it. As Barnlund (1989) noted, "to Japanese eyes one of the most shocking features of American social life is the way friendships survive frequent and even violent confrontations" (p. 43).

This was why Yoshiko was extremely surprised to see that her peers still remained friends even after they had argued in class. She said: "We always have arguments in class discussion. It is amazing, but after [the American students] step out from the classroom, they forget about that." She was bewildered by the way in which people kept "fighting" one another and yet could remain friends despite having been involved in an environment that caused her great discomfort. For Americans, however, arguments are about abstract things and not imply personal antagonism; they can separate these things easily and so do not feel uncomfortable in a situation where there is academic conflict; so they can still remain friends even after disagreeing loudly with one another over an issue (Ting-Toomey, 1999). In contrast, for Japanese students like Yoshiko, though, the issue and the people overlap to a very large degree; nothing is ever abstract.

#### **4-4. Lack of Language Proficiency**

In addition to cultural and class participation style differences, a lack of language proficiency has been identified as a major source of stress for Japanese and other Asian students that creates much frustration for them (Chen, 1996; Lin, 2006; Parker, 1999; Pinheiro, 2001; Sun & Chen, 1997; Wan, 2001). Merely attaining competence in matters of grammar and vocabulary is not nearly enough to overcome the language barriers that limit their participation in class discussions and activities, however. Speaking is a separate skill, which is why some U.S. faculty members want their institutions to evaluate language skills more effectively before admitting international students; they argue that "TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores do not seem to be indicative of whether the students can speak English or not" (Trice, 2001, p. 22).

Lin (2006) helpfully distinguished between four types of difficulties that Chinese students face in the U.S. in respect of language: (a) difficulty following discussions and participating in fast-paced graduate seminars; (b) difficulty keeping up with readings and responding in a critical fashion; (c) difficulty speaking and writing in English; (d) difficulty writing academic

papers to the accepted standard. In respect of the first two of these, she goes on to point out that successful participation in interactive classroom discussions requires a high level of language proficiency in the following areas: answering challenging questions posed by instructors and other students; asking challenging questions based on readings; justifying one's arguments clearly; and clarifying one's assertions and reasoning. These difficulties apply equally to Japanese students. Both critical thinking and the ability to write academic papers are especially hard to measure using results from TOEFL tests because these focus on listening comprehension, basic reading and writing skills, and grammar. Studies by Hwang and Dizney (1970), Mestre (1981), Mulligan, (1966), and Stover (1982) all seem to suggest no correlation between the TOEFL scores of overseas students and their academic success in U.S. higher institutions of learning. Thus, merely getting a high TOEFL score is not sufficient for Japanese students in order for them to be able to perform effectively in American classrooms.

My dissertation research (2009) threw light on this problem. Takashi, who has already introduced above, voiced his thoughts about interactive class activities such as brainstorming in the following terms:

The concept of brainstorming itself is very American. I had come across "brainstorming" as a technical word [when I was in Japan], but I don't think it'll take root in Japanese culture...In Japan, we have to present ideas that are well considered...you are not welcome to say anything that pops up into your mind, but, in the U.S., it is acceptable to present anything what you think.

This evidence from Takashi, like that presented in other academic studies, indicates that Japanese students employ sensitive guessing ability (*sasshi*) to behave in socially appropriate ways depending on the context, taking into consideration factors like place (*ba*) and space or timing (*ma*), in order to create and preserve harmony (*wa*). In Japan, the content of any speech must be obviously related to the discussion topic. In the light of this cultural difference, activities like brainstorming and improvisational speech and performance in small-group activities are challenging for Japanese students because they require high English proficiency and the ability to join in the rhythm of a rapid class discussion where the participants take it in turns to speak.

Takashi's experience cited above was shared by Yukio, aged 27, a fifth-year male master's student in social science who had a hard time keeping up with the speed of conversation in the classroom, especially early on in his program, but who got better at participating over time. He said:

I wanted to contribute in class discussion, but I could not. The speed of class discussion was too fast. It took time to think and

understand...Everybody raised a hand, and the instructor intervened and invited particular students to speak. But, at first, I had to ask the instructor if I could go back to the topic already covered in order to give my opinion. Gradually, though, my response time became shorter.

Liu argued that, "Asian students, especially the less self-assured, less competent, and less experienced, need time to prepare their comments or questions and need a supportive classroom environment" (2001, p. 197). However, this is not easy to arrange. My dissertation research (2009) revealed that American students who participate actively in class discussions sometimes cannot tolerate the slow thinking and speaking pace of Japanese students; this is made apparent particularly in nonverbal ways, such as by yawning or reading a book while Japanese students are talking. These kinds of behavior can, therefore, intimidate them about speaking up in class because they dislike such behavior, which they interpret as ridicule. Many international students experience such discomfort and anxiety, and face a steep learning curve to overcome it by speaking more quickly.

Canale (1983) stated that to be successful in U.S. higher education, international students need four major competencies in the communication process: the first is grammatical competence, which includes knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, and syntax; the second is sociolinguistic competence, which includes rules of appropriateness governing the use of forms and meanings in different contexts; the third is discourse competence, which includes the knowledge required to combine forms and meanings to achieve unified spoken and written discourse; and the fourth is strategic competence, which includes knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies. I would, however, add a further quality to these four; such students need to acquire the resilience to recover from their mistakes and laugh at themselves, and so build the self-esteem and confidence that will allow them to survive in a foreign country. It can take a long time to acquire all of these necessary items.

## 5. Summary

Merely acquiring English speaking ability does not help to prepare Japanese students to participate in class discussions or write academically competent papers. The language barriers they seem to face in the classroom are in fact also linked to differences of culture and class participation styles. Japanese students, therefore, need to venture outside their own national group and immerse themselves in the host culture in a variety of activities so as to acquire communicative competence. They need to be

willing to seek out individuals in the host culture who can serve as role models, and they can also prepare for their intercultural transition by reading books about culture shock or attending any pre-departure training sessions provided on their campus in Japan. Once they have started their program, they should write critical reflections on their intercultural experiences in order to acknowledge their own perspective and different frames of reference. Even more importantly, though, if U.S. faculty members and American students could be made more aware of the challenges that Japanese students face in American classrooms, this would enhance their intercultural sensitivity and hone their empathy skills to allow them to offer more help to people from different cultures. This, in turn, would support the learning of not just Japanese students but also that of other international students as they make the transition into the U.S. classroom.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the specific challenges that graduate-level Japanese international students face in U.S. higher education classrooms. My hope is that it will help both faculty members in Japan preparing students for the study-abroad experience, and those in the U.S. who are to be responsible for their learning once they arrive in America. The next step in the creation of a culturally responsive learning environment, therefore, is to enhance mutual understanding among teachers, American students, and international students. Crucial to achieving this is the acknowledgment by all parties of the uniqueness of their different cultures and a willingness to explore and accept these differences. American instructors and students, as well as Japanese students, need to become open-minded and curious about one another's cultures. In so doing, they will help to enhance intercultural competencies and create a warmer atmosphere that will benefit all the students in the classroom.

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