

Investigating the Experience of Japanese Graduate Students in U.S. Classrooms: A Description of, and Reflections on, the Methods Used in a Qualitative Narrative Research Study

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Abstract *For my investigation of the experience of Japanese graduate students in U.S. Higher Education classrooms, I chose to adopt a narrative approach and to collect data by utilizing a qualitative interview method. This paper describes the ways in which I went about realizing my objective of collecting adequate and reliable data on multiple student experiences. In the process, it also highlights how, unlike in quantitative studies that allow for the employment of an objective and value-free approach, researchers in qualitative ones such as mine cannot separate themselves from the subject of their studies to anything like the same degree. Thus, being a Japanese graduate student just like my research subjects, I rapidly became aware that their experiences were constructed in a context from which I could not readily abstract myself. In working to safeguard the accuracy of my data and the validity of my conclusions, I learned how crucial it was to maximize my self-awareness, to identify clearly my own perceptions and expectations, and thus to avoid imposing my own frame of references on the process of data collection and analysis. Conducting research in a U.S. environment also proved to be of value in improving my ability to*

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relate ethically to my research subjects. Learning to follow the ethical guidelines governing the conduct of research in the U.S increased my awareness of the need to keep a proper distance between myself as a researcher and my research subjects

Key words: Qualitative research, Narrative approach, Perceptions, Expectations

Interdisciplinary Fields: Research methodology, Education

1. Introduction

Creswell (2005) explored how, in narrative analysis, researchers retell the story. Patton's (2002) stated that "Stories are at the center of narrative analysis...how to interpret stories and the texts that tell the stories, is at the heart of narrative analysis" (p. 118), and this serves as a warning that preliminary data manipulation must be done carefully to avoid biasing the results. In the research for my dissertation on "Japanese international graduate students in U.S. higher education classrooms; an investigation of their pedagogical and epistemological challenges and supports," I explored the specific classroom challenges that such students face in U.S. higher education. My literature review led to the following research questions: (a) What are the challenges that Japanese students experience in relation to their intercultural transition into U.S. graduate-level classrooms; and (b) What kinds of support did Japanese students need or appreciate in learning and socializing with faculty and peers in their graduate-level classrooms?

For conducting a narrative study with my five research participants and conjointly writing their stories, it was crucial to establish a rapport with them and pay extra attention to ensure I did not impose my assumptions and values when reconstructing the interviewees' stories. In this article, I describe the

research method that I utilized for my dissertation research and research design, but also I reflect on the experience I had of conducting a narrative study in close cooperation with my informants and on what I learned about working accurately and ethically on my chosen topic.

2. Research Method

2-1. Rationale for Qualitative Method

The objective of my research was to gather data about Japanese students' experiences in their American graduate classrooms. From an "ontological perspective" (Guba & Lincoln, 1990), my study took a constructivist perspective rather than a positivist perspective since the aim was to learn how Japanese students behaved in "constructing knowledge about realities, not constructing reality itself" (Shadish, 1995b, p. 67). From my own experience and from my general observation of international students, I came to believe that Japanese students seem to face unique challenges because of their language barriers, learning style differences, and cultural differences. I felt that the realities of their experiences should be constructed in context, so that I was adopting a constructivist rather than a positivist perspective in which a single reality exists apart from their perceptions or interpretations of the real world.

Using qualitative methods allowed me to fulfill my intentions and expectations for this study, to look for perspectives subjectively based on their experiences in their American classrooms, described in their own words and in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance. In other words, the qualitative approach I took was "based on the assumption that an understanding of cultural patterns flow from immersing an investigator in the subject's natural environment" (Shuter, 1984, p. 197). Choosing a qualitative rather than quantitative approach for this study was, in part, based on the fact

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that I could not distance myself from my informants because I was a Japanese graduate international student myself with similar experiences in U.S. classroom contexts.

Thus, for my dissertation study, I wanted to see how my informants' experiences related to my own by utilizing the qualitative interview method. Listening to my informants' stories and rewriting them together promoted my interest in a holistic exploration of their experience in U.S. academic culture as opposed to focusing on one aspect of their lives, culture, or language development. I came to understand how my observing and interpreting their experiences needed to be done in the broadest possible context, since these experiences were influenced by their personalities and their previous lives in Japan. What they experienced in U.S. classrooms was not simply a product of what happened there. For example, the fact one of my informants felt that she was being ridiculed by her teacher needed to be put into the context of a similar experience that she had previously had in her school in Japan. The qualitative narrative approach was crucial in bringing such facts to the surface.

2-2. The Narrative Perspective

Narrative research focuses on a single person telling a story in detail (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), on collecting data by honoring an individual's story as data that is derived from his or her pure description of experience, and on analyzing the connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience (Bochner, 2001) rather than the broader picture of cultural norms as in ethnography or in grounded theory research (McCarthy, 1994). Among the fundamental questions in a narrative inquiry are, "What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be

interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it?" (Patton, 2002, p. 115).

The narrative perspective allows the researcher to capture and investigate the process that organizes and ascribes human experiences into meaningful episodes with a beginning, middle and end (Leitch, 1986). Thus, this design was appropriate for my study in order to investigate and analyze the process of Japanese students' individual experience of meeting challenges and receiving support for their transition into their graduate-level American classrooms. In this study, I explored Japanese experiences in American graduate classrooms by having them recall and analyze their past and present experiences. In this narrative study, I described in detail the context of Japanese graduate students' experiences as the central phenomenon.

In the procedures for conducting my narrative inquiry, I followed Creswell's (2005) seven steps in conducting narrative research:

- (1) Identify a phenomenon that addresses an educational problem.
- (2) Purposefully select an individual from whom you can learn about the phenomenon.
- (3) Collect stories from the individual that reflect personal and social experiences.
- (4) Restory or retell the individual's story (build in past, present, future; build in place or setting; describe their story; analyze their story for themes).
- (5) Collaborate with the participant/storyteller in all phases of research.
- (6) Write a story about the participant's personal and social experiences.
- (7) Validate the accuracy of the report. (pp. 484-487)

I found that retelling my informants' stories was no easy task, especially

when it came to selecting the scenes that I would restory with my informants. When checking with them on the use of specific scenes, I found that my own expectations had on occasion interfered with the selection criteria I had derived from the literature review. The narrative approach is a very complex one, and can become chaotic unless one anchors oneself very securely in objectively derived criteria.

3. Research Design

3-1. Research Participants

For this study, in order to secure five suitable Japanese graduate students (three male and two female), I used “purposeful sampling” and “intensity sampling” which are appropriate for studying information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). In my study, these sampling strategies were suitable for collecting rich information from informants who had experienced culture shock and challenges in their transition into American graduate-level classrooms. I selected Japanese graduate students who had been studying at Portland State University in the U.S. for at least one year and who had received their bachelor’s degrees in Japan. The period of cultural adjustment differs depending on the individual and the environment, but generally speaking those who receive their undergraduate degrees in Japan experience more difficulty participating fully in group discussion and exchanging opinions with their American peers than those who have lived and studied in the U.S. as undergraduates. Member of the latter group are more familiar with U.S. culture and more likely to have made more progress adjusting to cross-cultural differences.

Another common characteristic that I valued in my informants was that each of them had served as either graduate teaching assistants or graduate assistants or had work experience with faculty members, administrators or

students on a U.S. campus. In professional programs of doctoral-level graduate education it is especially important for students to socialize with faculty members and peers if they wish to become future faculty or researchers. This makes graduate courses and interactions with faculty different from undergraduate education, and gives Japanese students more opportunities to interact with faculty as well as students in their roles as graduate teaching assistants or graduate assistants. Thus, they must have social skills, which they might have honed having encountered unique challenges. I also used a snowball sampling strategy, which is a form of purposeful sampling in which, after a study has begun, new informants are found by asking research participants to recommend other individuals to study (Patton, 2002). This strategy was especially useful in finding one more informant for my research. The research participant who introduced me to that informant knew my research intentions well, so she suggested a good candidate.

In hindsight, though, I realize that I did not pay much attention to gender when trying to secure informants or anticipate how this would affect my data collection. But once I started the interviewing process, it became clear to me that the women participants disclosed their feelings and shared their experiences at a deeper level than the male informants, and I became aware that I felt emotionally closer to the female participants, and that this could affect my interviewing technique unless I was very careful. This was a valuable lesson in trying to improve my performance as a researcher.

3-2. Data Collection

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend that the best way to gather story is to interview the individual about his or her experience. I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews using the informal conversational interview approach, also known as unstructured interviewing (see Appendix: Interview

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Protocols), because such sets of interviews yield the richest data, details and new insights by allowing interviewers to have face-to-face contact with respondents. As Patton (2002) argued, the informal conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, which allows researchers to be flexible in adapting the interview to particular individuals or circumstances, to probe for more specific answers, to ask different questions for different interviewees and to observe nonverbal behavior to assess the validity of the respondent's answer. However Patton warned that the weakness of the informal conversational interview is that "this go-with-the-flow style of interviewing may be susceptible to interviewer effects, leading questions, and biases, especially with novices" (p. 343). I was especially aware of these issues in my process of collecting and analyzing data and how I dealt with them will be explained later.

To collect data, I conducted multiple interviews (three) of approximately 90 minutes each with each of the five Japanese graduate students (three men and two women) so that their stories could be retold and checked on separate occasions. In the interviews, I used Japanese with my informants because it was easier for both the interviewees and I to communicate in our first language, and we could have a more authentic conversation than we could in English. The interviewees could also think and explain their emotional experiences and feelings better in their first language.

Using multiple interviews with the same participant to gather more in-depth data led to a smaller sample size (Lee, Woo, & Mackenzie, 2002; Troiano, 2003). In the first of multiple interviews, I asked my interviewees to tell their stories about their experiences in order to learn about the challenges they had faced during to their intercultural transition into U.S. graduate-level classrooms, and about the kinds of support they needed or appreciated in learning and socializing with faculty and peers in their program. I listened

and did not interrupt them during the session, except when they needed to know in what context they should tell stories. I then asked them probing questions, which I had prepared in advance. Theories and concepts from my literature review were integrated into those questions.

By the second interview, I had transcribed the first interview. I used the second interview to clarify issues raised in the first interview and to ask for more examples and descriptions. In the second interview, I developed questions and prompts based on topics and events described by the participants in the first interview. I adapted some parts of interview protocol by Wilson (2007). My presenting statement to begin the second interview was:

Today, I would like to reconstruct details of your experience—stories about your experience on the particular happenings, incidents, or events in your U.S. graduate-level classrooms. I do have some prompts for you based upon the transcript of our first interview together. Please tell me when you are ready to begin.

Prompts and questions were designed to elicit more information about the topic or event, such as, “Can you tell me more about...?” “What was it like when...?” “Can you remember any examples of ...?” “What was it like?” “Can you remember any events involving...?” “Was there some particular crucial time or situation you recall?” (Wilson, 2007, p. 38). I integrated theories and concepts that I discussed in the literature review section into these questions. I kept at least one week between the second and third interviews.

By the third interview, I had transcribed the second interview and created an edited, combined transcript of both first and second interviews. I presented it to my interviewees in the third interview and encouraged them to add or delete any information. My presenting statement to begin the third interview was:

Thank you for participating with the third interview to fully develop

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your input to the story of Japanese students experience in U.S. graduate-level classrooms. I transcribed the second interview and edited, combined transcript of both first and second interviews. In this interview, I will present and explain what I transcribed and edited to you, and next I will ask you some questions to explore your interpretation and explanation of important moments or events in your study-abroad experience in your U.S. graduate program. This will help me to check and edit the transcript with you. If I miss something significant, please be sure to include it during the interview.

In the concluding questions, I asked what advice they would give to faculty as well as new international students coming from Japan. This question became a summary of their answers and the key points they wanted to convey about their experiences in their American graduate classrooms. Finally, I asked them if they had anything else to add. If there was nothing, I thanked them for their cooperation.

Looking back on these interviews, I came to see that while I had collected roughly the same quantity of data from each informant, the quality of that data was not uniform. As noted above, the female informants disclosed their emotions and experiences more fully than the male ones, despite my using the same kinds of prompts. This taught me that I needed to consider whether the prompting and questioning techniques I used needed to be adapted to take account of gender.

3-3. Interview Preparation, Process and Site

First of all, before I contacted the informants or collected any data, I submitted an application to the Human Subject Resource Committee at my institution and received approval. Next, in order to access the research participants, I emailed selected individuals describing my intensity sampling

strategies and explaining my research to them with a view to recruiting participants with a strong emphasis on voluntary participation. A week before the first interview, I sent my interviewees an introductory script via email to explain my research purpose and the ultimate goals of my study. I also let them know at that time that I would like to audio tape record the interview. This helped my interviewees prepare for the interviews.

In terms of locations, I found quiet and suitable places for conducting the interviews, where we could talk and record the conversation without interruption. For some interviews, we used my informants' offices after work. These proved quiet and there were no interruptions, so both of us could relax. I also created a non-threatening environment in which participants would feel comfortable by bringing along coffee. Before I conducted the interview, I thanked them for participating in this study, and I showed them an informed consent form, and explained and asked them to sign it if they agreed with the process.

All the interviews were conducted in Japanese and were audio tape-recorded verbatim, which allowed me to focus on the specific details of what participants had said. Additionally, I followed Patton's (2002) recommendation about note taking during the interviews. It helped me to "formulate new questions as the interview moves along" and to "pace the interview by providing nonverbal cues about what's important, providing feedback to the interviewee about what kinds of things are especially 'noteworthy'" (p. 383). It was useful to sort the variety of data after each interview, looking at multiple interviews together, where answers to interview questions from different interviews showed similar themes worth noting.

3-4. Transcribing the Interviews

I used a *naturalized* approach for my transcriptions since my informants

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were from Japanese culture, and tend to rely on nonverbal communication such as pose, silence, gesture and eye contact. With the *naturalized* approach, every utterance or nonverbal cue (tone of voice, space between words, silence, accents) is transcribed in detail, so researchers work for a full and faithful transcription. On the other hand, a *denaturalized* approach, which has been used in grounded theory research and discourse analysis, has less to do with transcribing those nonverbal parts. For example, in *denaturalized* transcripts, “grammar is corrected, interview noise (e.g., stutters pauses, etc.) is removed and nonstandard accents (i.e., non-majority) are standardized” (Oliver et al., 2005, ¶ 1).

Analyzing and gathering data promptly allowed me to structure future data collection efforts based on emerging themes, while avoiding collecting unfocused, repetitive and voluminous data (Merriam, 1998). However, as Seidman (1998) noted, “the danger is that the researcher will try to force the excerpts into categories, and the categories into themes that he or she already has in mind, rather than let them develop from the experience of the participants as represented in the interviews” (p. 110). In the process of transcribing data, as mentioned above, I was fully aware of the danger of imposing my thoughts while interpreting the data, and tried to guard against doing so by reporting the statements of my interviewees accurately, and acknowledging my assumptions and biases before beginning the research.

In order to ensure proper transcriptions, I conducted “cross-checking” (Klockars, 1977). Klockars argued that a researcher should impose cross-checks on the informants’ stories. Cross-checking can be done by paying attention to informants’ statements for consistency and seeing if interviewees are covering the same events several times over the course of the interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In narrative research, one of the potential problems is that “the participant’s voice is lost in the final narrative report” (Creswell,

2005, p. 484). In order to re-story or retell the individual's story without losing my interviewee's voice, I employed "member checking" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When conducting the multiple interviews, I did member checking by asking my research participants to reflect on what we had discussed in the first and second interviews during the third interview.

Since all the interview data was in Japanese, the translation of these texts was the next crucial step in the procedure of writing the study in English. I used techniques of back translation in my study, translating key sentences from the Japanese transcripts into English, and having another translator, who was also fluent in both Japanese and English and had her doctoral degree, prepare a back translation from the English to Japanese. This translator's back translation and the original data were compared, and the accuracy was assessed to ensure validity of the data.

3-5. Data Analysis

Patton's statement (2002) that, "how to interpret stories and the texts that tell the stories, is at the heart of narrative analysis" (p. 118), warns that preliminary data manipulation must be done carefully to avoid biasing the result. In order to conduct the intellectual and mechanical work of analysis, I followed the procedure of analyzing data by Patton's method of "coding data, finding patterns, labeling themes, and a developing category system" (pp. 462-467). For coding data, I began by reading the interview transcripts and making comments in the margins. When I developed categories, I described the setting of a context such as time, place, plot and scene by using the idea of "context sensitivity" (Patton, 2002). This analysis strategy implies that we should be sensitive with "a social, historical, and temporal context" (p. 41).

Making analytic memos was useful in order to reflect on my research throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data. Janesick (2004)

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emphasized the importance of journal writing for qualitative research in order to: refine the understanding of the role of the researcher through reflection and writing; refine the understanding of participant responses; and use a journal as a tool for learning about the researcher's own thinking and reflection patterns. Analytic memo and journal writing helped me organize ideas and insights, that I derived from the interview data as well as literature that could be used when reporting findings.

3-6. Reporting My Findings

In reporting findings, Patton (2002) suggested that a researcher should maintain a balance between description and interpretation and be aware of using metaphors and analogies and drawing conclusions. So I kept in mind the following comments on the importance of maintaining a balance between description and interpretation; “[s]ufficient description and direct quotations should be included to allow the reader to enter into the situation and thoughts of the people represented in the report..., but it should stop short” because “[e]ndless description becomes its own muddle” (p. 503); as well as the words of Wilson (2007) that “the researcher, acting as a narrative inquirer” (p. 27) needs to recognize ethically that reconstructing a story involves a process of reflecting the researcher's frame of reference so as to avoid the problem of imposing that when retelling the story.

I also recognized that metaphors and analogies can attract readers of qualitative studies because of their effectiveness, but that they vary depending on culture, so it was important to check with my interviewees on the meaning of any metaphors and analogies they used. As Patton warned that some analogies offend certain audiences, I tried to select them with sensitivity to how my intended audiences would respond. Finally, drawing conclusions from qualitative studies is challenging. As Patton advised, I tried to be careful “not

to take anything for granted or fall into following some recipe for writing” (p. 506). This was a useful reminder to me that what I analyzed was just a part of the Japanese students’ individual realities and that I should not take for granted that what I had found represented the whole of them.

3-7. Validity and Credibility

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) contended that the reliability and validity of findings were important in all fields that engage in scientific inquiry. In qualitative research, the meaningfulness of studies is emphasized to demonstrate validity (Deutscher, Pestello, & Pestello, 1993). It does not mean that “qualitative researchers are unconcerned about the accuracy of their data” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 9), but I tried to make sure that I attended to the credibility (internal validity) of my findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I worked to identify my biases, expectations, and prejudices in relation to the research in order to enhance internal validity; one such was my belief that at the beginning of their U.S. educational experience, Japanese students do not know what is appropriate in their interactions with faculty members.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), credibility can be verified by: (a) prolonged engagement; (b) persistent observation; (c) peer debriefing; (d) negative case analysis; (e) progressive subjectivity; and (f) member checks. In order to ensure credibility, I conducted “member checking” (Patton, 2002) by asking my research participants to reflect on what we had discussed to check the accuracy of the account at the end of an interview.

3-8. Credibility (Internal Validity)

Credibility (internal validity) refers to the extent that measurements are representative of reality, whereas external validity concerns the degree that the representations of reality can be compared legitimately across groups

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(LeCompts & Goetz, 1982). In order to enhance internal validity and reduce the interviewer effect, I conducted some pilot studies in advance and tape-recorded my voice. During the interviews themselves, I monitored my tone of voice, trying to evaluate how I interacted with my interviewees, and how my interviewees reacted to me. I noted that my voice sounded nervous and that I kept making ‘filler’ sounds like “well” or “um.” I realized that interviewing is a professional skill akin to acting, and that I needed to find a more relaxed, professional voice that would relax my interviewees. I tried to keep the following words in my mind; the “interviewer effect refers to the change in a respondent’s behavior or answers that are the result of being interviewed by a specific interviewer”(Adler & Clark, 1999, p. 218), which meant that I should acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of my researcher status as a Japanese international student, the same status as her research participants. It was an advantage for me having shared the same Japanese culture and similar experience as an international student, which increased my understanding and allowed for a more accurate interpretation of my informants’ experiences.

In addition, triangulation was used in my research to enhance internal validity. This was one of the most important elements in establishing trustworthiness of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation refers to the combination of methods or data resources in a single study (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) noted that “[t]riangulation is often thought of as a way of checking out insights gleaned from different informants or different sources of data.” In my study, observing or interviewing a different population than Japanese students was not involved, but I conducted multiple interviews that ensured triangulation. Conducting multiple interviews (three times) with each of my informants helped reduce the potential bias in data collection. Moreover, since all the interviews were conducted in Japanese, back translation of collected data and analyzed data enhanced the internal

validity of the data.

4. Limitations

As with all research, one's methodology poses some potential limitations. I used the conversational interview as my modus operandi, which offered me maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appeared to be appropriate. This informal conversational interview also gave my interviewees freedom to tell their stories, to explore memories that sometimes stirred their emotions. One of the interviewees started to share experiences that were not related to the American classroom. Additionally, some of my interviewees became emotional when they were talking about their most painful memories. There were also feelings of anger at times. Memories from before they came to the U.S. also appeared during the interviews. I see now that I could have trained myself better to be able to find the right balance in terms of how much I should have guided the direction of the informant's comments during that interview. I also came to see that while avoiding the use of guiding questions gives interviewees freedom to tell their stories, this needs to be balanced against the need to move the interview in the most useful direction.

Another potential limitation of my study was that my interviewees' comments sometimes went back and forth from past to present, which was difficult to make sense of later on when processing the data. I also had data from multiple interviews, which was challenging to arrange in chronological order and sort through, given the repetition of stories. However, when I conducted the multiple interviews, I did "member checking" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) at the start of the final interview by asking my research participants to reflect on what we had discussed in prior interviews. This helped me to re-story or retell the individual's story without losing my interviewee's voice, and

to make sure I had understood the flow of their stories.

Additionally, my familiarity with the subject, since I was at the time a Japanese international graduate student, may have decreased my critical awareness in this research. No individual researcher can be entirely neutral either in quantitative or qualitative research, and to try to achieve as much neutrality as possible, I carefully monitored my expectations, assumptions, values, and feelings toward the interviewees and their stories when analyzing the data. Even so, I noticed my assumptions had some effect on how I categorized my data in the analysis section. There is still a tendency for us to believe that our own reality is the correct perception. I revised the outline of the analysis section until I deemed it was sufficiently objective and valid.

5. Reflection on Relational Aspects in Working Ethically with My Research Participants

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pointed out that narrative research requires collaborative work between researcher and participant to lessen the potential gap between the narrative told and the narrative reported. In order to construct a good working relationship with my informants so we could work collaboratively, there were a number of issues that I had to consider. I followed the ethical issues checklist by Patton (2002), which includes nine elements to consider in qualitative interviewing: (a) explaining purpose; (b) promises and reciprocity; (c) risk assessment; (d) confidentiality; (e) informed consent; (f) data access and ownership; (g) interviewer mental health; (h) data collection boundaries; and (i) ethical versus legal (p. 408-409).

I explained the purpose of the study and the inquiry to the participants by using Japanese and speaking in culturally appropriate ways. I also told them that this study aimed to help not only Japanese students but also other international students, as well as faculty and schools. With promises and

reciprocity, I explained to my research informants that they might not receive any direct benefit from participation in this study, but their participation might help to increase knowledge which could benefit others in the future, and they agreed to participate in my research.

Regarding risk assessment, I told my research informants that my study would not affect their course grade or their relationship with instructors in their programs. In terms of promising confidentiality, I told them that the audio tapes used to record the interviews would be kept in a locked safe place where they would only be accessible by the researcher and these audio tapes would be destroyed after the study is completed. I asked their permission to use pseudonyms when utilizing the interview data and they agreed. For informed consent, I gave them a copy of the form before the interview and received their signatures on both my and their copies if they agreed with that. For data access and ownership, I explained to my informants that the raw data was only accessible by the researcher.

Regarding interviewee mental health, I checked their feelings and willingness to participate in the interview, and told them that if they felt uncomfortable with any of the questions, they would be free to skip any them or withdraw at any time. Regarding data collection boundaries, I respected my informants' personal boundaries and checked with them often during the interview to see how they were doing. I also created a comfortable space by choosing a comfortable location for my interviewees and help them open their minds and share their personal experiences and perspectives by listening to them mindfully. Finally, for ethical and legal issues, I submitted the documents to the Human Subject Research committee in order to ensure that my research was ethical and legal.

From all of this, I learned to develop a better awareness of how to keep an ethically appropriate distance from my informants and to allow them

complete choice as to whether and how far they wished to pursue sensitive topics relating to their families, their health or financial issues.

6. Summary

The narrative form of inquiry is flexible, innovative, unpredictable, and full of rich details so that researchers are required a wide range of research skills. In the process of conducting my narrative study, I found that I had to work to train myself to be fully aware of and guard against the danger of imposing my biases and guiding questions while interviewing and interpreting the data. This experience was challenging, but also genuinely rewarding as I moved further into exploring my informants' experiences and worldviews and writing their stories together with them. I also appreciated being given the chance to face and reflect on my assumptions, bias and even ego in the whole process of my research. As Wilson (2007) contended, a holistic view invites a lot of reflection. Overall, it was a real pleasure to build a rapport with my research participants. They gave me feedback that they enjoyed talking about themselves and being listened to attentively. This narrative study proved of real value not only for studying my research participants' experiences but also for getting to know myself better as well.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

First interview protocol

The presenting statement to begin the first interview is:

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your name will not be used in the study and your confidentiality will be maintained throughout and following the study.

In this interview, I would like to hear the story of your experience in graduate-level U.S. classrooms.

First of all, I would like to ask you some introduction questions.

Introduction questions:

1. Will you tell me your educational background?
 - a. What is the last degree you earned in your home country and when was it?
 - b. How many years have you been studying in your program?
 - c. What is your major now?
2. Please tell me what you were doing in Japan before you came to the U.S.
3. Did you have any anxiety before coming to the U.S.?
4. Besides studying in your graduate program, are you working as a professional (e.g. graduate assistant or graduate teaching assistant) on campus?

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Interview:

Next, I would like to hear the story of your experience in graduate-level U.S. classrooms in order to learn what challenges you have experienced related to your intercultural transition into U.S. graduate-level classrooms; and what kinds of support you have needed or appreciated in learning and socializing with your faculty and peers in your graduate-level classrooms?

Please take a moment and reflect on your experience in graduate-level classrooms. You can start wherever you would like. I will take some notes while I am listening to you.

If it is necessary, prompts and questions will be asked to elicit more information about the topic or events based on research questions: (a) What are the challenges that Japanese graduate students experience related to their intercultural transition into U.S. graduate-level classrooms; (b) What kinds of support have Japanese graduate students needed or appreciated in learning and socializing with their faculty and peers in their graduate-level classrooms? Prompts and questions related to research question (a) are:

1. Have you had any challenge related to language problems including writing academic papers? If so, can you tell me about it? (language)
2. Have you had any challenge related to class activities such as class discussion, group presentations, research, critical thinking? If so, can you tell me about it? (learning styles)
3. Have your preferred learning activities changed over time? If so, can you tell me more about it? (learning styles)
4. Have you had any emotional experience in class, can you tell me about it? Does the emotional experience come from the cultural differences? (culture shock, intercultural experience, uncertainty)

avoidance, power distance, loosing face, in-group vs. out-group)

5. Have you felt that you were treated in unpleasant ways by faculty or peers in class? If so, can you tell me about it? (socialization as professional)
6. What do you think are the differences between American and Japanese classrooms? (pedagogy, Confucianism)

Prompts and questions related to research question (b) are:

7. When you had any challenge related to language problems (e.g. writing academic paper or writing styles), what kinds of support were helpful? (language)
8. When you were not participating actively in the activities, what kinds of support from teachers or peers might have helped to increase your level of participation? (learning styles)
9. When you had any emotional experience, what kinds of support did you need to ease yourself? (culture shock, intercultural experience, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, loosing face, in-group vs. out-group)
10. As a graduate student, how do you expect faculty members and peers to treat you or support you? (socialization as professional.)
11. Have you made a good relationship with your instructors or any American students on campus? If so, what kinds of support have you received from them? (socialization as professional.)
12. What kinds of support do you think helped your transition into American graduate-level classrooms? (pedagogy, cultural differences)

Second interview protocol

The first interview will be transcribed. The second interview is an attempt to clarify issues raised in the first interview and to ask for more examples and descriptions. I will develop questions and prompts for the second interview on topics and events described by the participants in the first interview. The presenting statement to begin the second interview is (This part of interview protocol was adapted from Wilson, 2007, p. 38):

Today, I would like to reconstruct details of your experience with you—stories about your experience on the particular happenings, incidents, or events in your U.S. graduate-level classrooms. I do have some prompts for you based upon the transcript of our first interview together. Please tell me when you are ready to begin.

Prompts and questions will be designed to elicit more information about the topic or event, such as,

“Can you tell me more about...?”

“What was it like when...?”

“Can you remember any examples of ...?”

“What was it like?”

“Can you remember any events involving...?”

“Was there some particular crucial time or situation you recall?”

“Is there anything else you would like to add?”

Third interview protocol

The second interview will be transcribed. I will create an edited, combined transcript of both interviews. In the third interview, I will first present it to my interviewee and I will encourage the participant to add or delete information from the document in presentation for the third interview.

The presenting statement to begin the third interview is:

Thank you for participating with the third interview to fully develop your input to the story of Japanese students experience in U.S. graduate-level classrooms. I transcribed the second interview and edited, combined the transcript of both first and second interviews. In this interview, I will present and explain what I transcribed and edited to you, and next I will ask you some questions to explore your interpretation and explanation of important moments or events in your U.S. graduate program. This will help me to check and edit the transcript with you. If I miss something significant, please be sure to include it during the interview.

Next, I will ask them closing questions.

Closing questions:

1. How have your expectations about studying in the U.S. changed after you finished your first (or second) year in your program?
2. Give five pieces of advice to a faculty member teaching someone like you.
3. Do you have any advice for new international students from your country (or culture) to help them succeed in American classrooms?
4. Finally, do you have anything else to add? If not, thank you so much for your cooperation.