

Ongoing Study Language Learning for Life: Experiences of Female Japanese Doctoral Candidates

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To encourage Japanese women's higher education in English, narrative analysis of five Japanese female graduate students enrolled at an American university's doctoral course in Japan has been conducted. The research focuses are on (a) how they transform into academically oriented persons, (b) what motivated them to choose the American university doctoral course in Japan, (c) what difficulties they have as non-native speakers of English, (d) what support and stress they receive from their professors, peers and family members, (e) how they manage their time/health/pressures to study/research and live, (f) what social and cultural factors influence their experiences, learning and identity. Some similarities and differences have been found. They are discussed in the respective multiple contexts as non-native speakers of English, language teachers, and Japanese women.

日本人女性の英語における高等教育を促進するために、日本にあるアメリカの大学院博士課程に在籍する5人の日本人女子大学院生のナラティブ分析を行った。研究の焦点は、以下の通りである。(a) 彼女らがどのようにしてアカデミックな人間に変わっていくか、(b) アメリカの大学院博士課程の日本校を選んだ動機は何か、(c) 英語の非母語話者として、どのような困難があるか、(d) 教授、同級生、家族等からどのようなサポートやストレスを受けているか、(e) 勉強、研究そして生活のために、どのようにして、時間、健康、プレッシャーなどを管理しているか、(f) どのような社会的、文化的要因が、彼女らの経験、学習そしてアイデンティティに影響を与えているか。これらの点について、いくつかの類似点や相違点が見られた。英語の非母語話者、語学教師、および日本人女性としての複数の文脈で、それらが述べられる。

As of April 30, 2004 in a Website of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Tokyo Center, it was reported that Japanese university education is the fourth highest among OECD countries. According to the OECD Database 2000, 23% of the population between the ages of 25 and 34 held an undergraduate degree. It also stated that 33% of Japanese men (aged 25 – 34) held an undergraduate degree while only 14% of Japanese women in the same age range held the same degree. Based on data of 1994 School Basic Survey of the Ministry of Education, Sugimoto (1997) asserts that 90% of junior college students and only 30% of four-year university students were female (p. 110). It is very difficult, if not impossible, to acquire information of the rates of postgraduate degree holders and their gender differences in Japan. However, according to the information offered by OECD Tokyo Center and Sugimoto (1997), it can be inferred that the number of Japanese females who enroll in doctoral programs offered at an American university in Japan is significantly small, and no in-depth study about them has been reported. Thus, it is important to find out what motivates Japanese women to pursue higher education in English, what difficulties they face when they seek higher academic study in English and how they change in the academic context.

Ohmi (2004) described how her views about teaching and learning English had changed through her experiences in different cultural contexts. She first sought freedom in learning English in the United States to escape from the pressure she felt in the Japanese society where the traditional norm and expectation for women is to get married and adjust their career plans to their respective husbands. However, having had realized “the stereotyped images that Americans in general have about Japan, and those of Japanese about the U.S., largely reflected socio-economic, socio-political, and historical backgrounds of the two countries” (p. 98), she lost her motivation to learn and teach English. Later, having participated in an Asian women’s conference in the Philippines, she discovered the value of English as an international language and enrolled in a TESOL master’s program in the U.S. However, as a non-native teacher of English, she described that she had an inferiority complex based on the value of American middle-class English as the norm.

Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, and Kinlaw (2000) report their quantitative research which investigated doctoral students’ experiences in the United States: perceptions of support from: mentor; peer/colleague; family and partner, family issues, stress, academic self-concept, and career commitment, in relation to the students’ genders, in gender-balanced and male-dominated graduate programs. They found that “most of the study variables were related to career commitment for both men and women, with mentor support and academic self-concept emerging as the strongest predictors” (p. 304). The authors reported on a two-year time period having a significant effect on both male and

female students in which they showed “significant drops in self-concept and career commitment across 2 years” (p. 304). As one of the implications of their study, they suggested to include “qualitative assessment techniques such as individual narratives” (p. 306) to improve this type of research. In her comprehensive reviews of studies related to issues on the relationship between gender and SL/FL education, Sunderland (2000) indicates that there are a great number of studies done on these issues in the UK and in the US. However, there is a lack of such studies in Japan; therefore, a narrative study on Japanese female doctoral students’ experiences has a great value in understanding the complexity of language learning for life in a Japanese context.

The Japanese female participants of this study are predicted to have faced experiences similar to some of the ones Ohmi (2004) describes, such as seeking a different environment from Japanese society and feeling an inferiority complex as non-native speakers of English. They may be surrounded with the issues that Ülkü-Steiner et al (2000) report: support from: professors; other cohort members; family and partner, family issues, stress, academic self-concept, and career commitment. The participants may have been silent about their ambitions for their research interests and career development in and/or outside of the academic contexts. The participants may refuse to be called intellectuals because of their beliefs about the positions of Japanese women in Japan that female intellectuals may not be well received in the society, or for other reasons. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that a person’s perceptions of her *positions* in the world (which may

influence her identity construction) and how it can change through her interactions with other people. According to Ohmi, it seems to be prominent in interactions with other cultural groups, and through the experiences of learning and teaching languages.

As Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes, and Kinlaw (2000) suggest, we decided to conduct a study about Japanese women who are studying in a doctoral program. We used mainly narrative inquiry in order to better understand them. This study is a longitudinal one and still in progress; however, the data acquired from the research participants are richer than expected. It might have a great value to women who are pursuing higher education. Thus, we decide to report the tentative findings of our research.

The Study

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the conditions of Japanese women enrolled in a doctoral program and how they are transformed into academically oriented persons while participating in academic discourse. It is hoped that the information and contributions provided by participants will be of value to women who are pursuing higher education as well as for those who are concerned with women's education.

Research Questions

Having higher education for women is important in order to develop gender equality in Japan. Thus, understanding the motivation of women who seek higher education is

important in order to encourage other women. And, it is interesting to see why the participants chose American university's doctoral course in Japan even though there are a lot more Japanese universities. And when we see their long-term commitment of learning English and studying academic content, TESOL, in English, it is important to see their experiences and changes of the ways in which they look at the world (in other words, their transformation of identity). We need to understand them in relation with their life history, in their particular sociocultural contexts. These led us to develop the first and the last research questions. The other research questions came Ülkü-Steiner et al.'s (2000) study, on which how the contexts influence the participants' motivation. The research questions, therefore, in this study are as follows:

1. How are Japanese women transformed into academically oriented persons while participating in a doctoral program at an American university in Japan?
2. What motivated them to choose a doctoral program at an American university in Japan, rather than at a Japanese university?
3. What difficulties have they experienced or do they expect to have as non-native speakers of English?
4. What forms of support as well as stress do they receive from their professors, peers and family members?
5. How do they manage their time, health, and related pressures to study and conduct research within multiple contexts?
6. What social and cultural factors influence their experiences, learning and identity?

Participants

The participants in this study are five female Japanese doctoral candidates studying at an American university in Japan. All of them earned a master's degree in this university although they had a bachelor's degree from Japanese universities. They are English instructors teaching in different contexts. Sakura is a full-time English teacher at a public high school. Mariko is a full-time English teacher at a public junior high school. Chiharu teaches English to learners of all ages in a private language school of her own. Sachiko teaches English at two different universities as a part-time instructor. Ai teaches English to Japanese students at a university, and English and Japanese to foreign students at another university, as a part-time instructor. Chiharu and Ai are the researchers as well as the participants of this study. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Procedures

The first formal meeting with the participants in which the purpose and procedures of this research were explained was held during their second year of the doctoral course in March 2004. After the written consent forms were filled in, an open-ended questionnaire was completed by each participant to explore their circumstances and thoughts. In the summer of the same year, five individual interviews and a few follow-up ones were conducted with all of the participants.

Instrument

The questionnaire contained the 21 items with regard to motivation, expectations and experiences at work, personality and cognitive types, management of time,

finance and health, support and stress for the study, issues on quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, worries and expected difficulties in pursuing the doctoral program, and the cultural context. The questions were generated by the researchers based on the research questions. Because it was an open-ended questionnaire, the volume of the answers varied depending on each participant, and the number of pages ended up from 3.5 to 7 pages. These descriptive data were coded and analyzed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually to investigate more situated conditions. Each interview lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. The interview questions were devised separately from the questionnaire in order to have triangulation. The questions included personal history of English learning and teaching, philosophy of education, opinions about their own position as a language teacher in the society, the meaning of the doctoral study in their lives, daily life and future goals. Some interviews were conducted at the university before class, and some were done in a participant's house at night. Later, three follow-up unstructured interviews were conducted with three participants to have a better understanding of their situations and thinking. The time for the follow-up interviews were from 15 to 40 minutes.

Data-collecting

The researchers emailed the questionnaire to all the participants. The participants downloaded it respectively and wrote it in as much as they wanted. Then, they printed it out and gave it back to the researchers in an envelope, which the researchers prepared to keep the participants' anonymity.

All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Findings

From the data we collected through meetings, the questionnaire answers and interviews, we found that there are similarities and differences among the research participants' experiences.

Similarities

1. All of the participants majored in English literature when they were undergraduates at Japanese colleges or universities and felt the need to study about teaching English as a second language (TESOL) and the communicative approach; therefore, they studied in the master's program at an American university in Japan. They liked to study using English rather than Japanese at Japanese universities and were eager to learn more in the field of teaching language and education. Thus, they decided to enroll in the same university's doctoral program in order to have higher education.
2. All of the participants have difficulties in balancing work, study and private lives. Three of them take the time to exercise or play sports to release stress and maintain their health.
3. Most participants have support from their family members. Some of them feel that going out with cohort members and professors is very important for them to learn and remain motivated to continue studying in the program.

4. All of the participants feel that it takes a long time to read and understand required materials and write assignments and course papers. However, they feel that it is worth the struggle in order to have sufficient knowledge of TESOL, second language acquisition and research in education.

Differences

Since the space is limited, some representative differences are described. They are reported in the narrative form since they are situated in the participants' social and cultural contexts, thus difficult to describe in a few lines.

Q1: How are Japanese women transformed into academically oriented persons while participating in a doctoral program at an American university in Japan?

In Ai's Case

When Ai entered the doctoral program in this university, her motivation was instrumental. Because of her need to be financially independent due to her divorce, she began to seek a more secured full-time teaching position at a university. In order to get a full-time position, she thought having a doctoral degree was necessary. Besides, she had wanted to continue studying about the theories of SLA further because when she finished her master's course several years before, she felt like she was just beginning to understand them. Thus, she did not expect her focus to be very research-oriented at the beginning of the program.

However, in the first course she took, *Introduction to Research in SLA/TESOL*, she read one article concerning *critical thinking* and *connected knowing* (Clinchy, 1994), and became inspired to research. The idea of *critical thinking*

was quite new to her as she had lived in a society that did not encourage women to think critically. As she reflected on her life, she realized that there were not many opportunities for Japanese women to view their lives critically. Accordingly, she became interested in studying feminism and decided to have feminism as her research theme. She is excited about studying it because she can take a *connected knowing* (Clinchy, 1994) approach.

She researched gender differences in motivational attitudes toward studying English and made a few academic presentations. In the process of research, she received great support from her professors, cohort members, her students and coworkers. By attending academic conferences, she met people in different academic fields and was impressed by their serious attitudes for their research and knowledge in their respective fields. Having been involved in activities in research and interacting with other researchers, she feels that research in feminism is very interesting even though it is a difficult area. She feels that she has changed a lot since she started studying in the doctoral program. She has improved in her critical thinking skills and awareness of the importance of being connected and knowing and individual differences. It was stated that reading in the areas of feminism, education, and postmodernism was helpful.

Q2: What motivated them to choose a doctoral program at an American university in Japan, rather than at a Japanese university?

In Chiharu's Case

The most significant issue in Chiharu's life was that for a long time she wondered whether she should become a

medical doctor because she was born into a medical doctor's family or study English, which she liked. Yet while majoring in English and American literature at a university, she was still undecided. When she talked about it with her parents, they said that it was not necessary for her to become a medical doctor, so she was relieved and was able to study English. After she graduated from the university, she worked as an office clerk using English; however, she felt that it was not her place to work for a long time.

Therefore, after Chiharu worked as an office clerk for two years, she went to the United States for five months to study English and experienced the communicative teaching approach for the first time in her life. Because she had only experienced grammar translation method and teacher-centered instruction in Japanese schools, she was awakened by such interactive approaches and became interested in teaching English. Also, she found that classrooms in the United States had a very relaxing and democratic atmosphere, which she felt was very different from the Japanese classroom environment. Because she liked the American school atmosphere better, she chose an American university to learn TESOL.

After she came back to Japan, she started to teach at English conversation schools near her hometown. As soon as she started teaching English, she felt that it was her life's work because she really liked it. When she needed to move to a very remote rural area for her husband's job, she found out about a master's program offered by an American university in Japan. She decided to study in the program not only because she wanted to get a master's degree but also because she wanted to escape from the rural area once

a week. It took over seven hours to get to school from her home, but she was happy to come to a big city to meet people and study English.

After completing her master's degree, she wondered what she should do next. She opened her own English school through which she hoped to contribute her knowledge and abilities to the people in the community. Three years after she started the school, the business became steady enough for her to begin a doctoral program. She wanted to earn a doctorate because she was born to a family of medical doctors, and earning a doctoral degree would allow her to feel integrated with her family members even though she did not become a medical doctor.

Q3: What difficulties have they experienced or do they expect to have as non-native speakers of English?

In Ai's Case

Ai feels that Japanese female cohort members do not have skills to communicate with American professors in the way that native speakers are typically able to. She thinks that such communication skills are important in developing good relationships with professors, acquiring academic information and learning how to behave as a member of academia.

In Sakura's case

When Sakura enrolled in the doctoral program, she was a homeroom teacher with a less busy schedule, so she was able to find time to focus on studying in the courses in the first term. However, since she is now the homeroom teacher for second year students, teaches 15 hours a week, takes care of

a weekly homeroom, and is a tennis club adviser, she feels that it is very difficult to find time to study enough for the doctoral course work.

Q4: What forms of support as well as stress do they receive from their professors, peers and family members?

In Sachiko's Case

Sachiko's main concern is about how her studies affect her family. She feels that she receives great support from her husband. However, it is difficult for him because he must take the burden of domestic responsibilities such as child rearing, though he would like to have time for his own study for professional development. When she finished her master's program, he was happy and did not expect that she would continue studying in the doctoral program. When he found out, he was surprised, but also knew that he would not be able to and would not want to hold her back. She has been feeling guilty about her husband bearing the majority of the housework and child rearing responsibilities.

Q5: How do they manage their time, health, and related pressures to study and conduct research within multiple contexts?

In Sachiko's case

Sachiko decreased her teaching hours and wakes up early in the morning to study. Her core studying time—when she is able to complete her reading and writing—is from before her family members wake up until she must go to work. When she needs to prepare for her teaching and checks her students' papers, she does not have enough time to study.

She enjoys exercising such as aerobics, jogging, and walking her dog, which helps her to maintain her health and to release stress.

In Mariko's Case

Mariko finds it difficult to manage her time and stress while studying in the doctoral course and working as a full-time teacher at a public school. She realizes that being in this program has affected both her physical and mental health. She always feels great stress because she cannot reduce her workload even though she wants to concentrate on studying for the course. Because of the psychological pressure and time constraints, she sometimes feels nausea but still tries to study and work very hard.

Q6: What social and cultural factors influence their experiences, learning and identity?

In Mariko's Case

Mariko is in adverse circumstances against women at work. Actually, there are almost no women teachers around her in supervising positions such as chief, vice principal or principal. She feels that, in general, older male teachers tend to dislike female teachers who have or try to earn a higher degree or certificate. For example, before and after she was dispatched to the United States for teacher training, she received a lot of harassment and offensive comments, especially from male teachers. Because of these circumstances, she keeps it secret from other teachers (except her direct bosses) that she is studying in a doctoral course.

In Sachiko's case

Sachiko sometimes feels difficulty saying that she has been

studying as a doctoral candidate to other women such as those who come to help take care of chores for baseball team practice that her son participates in. She said that some of them stepped back when she mentioned it, giving her the impression that they considered her very different from them. This made her feel sad.

Tentative Conclusions

The findings of our research questions, such as motivation to become doctoral candidates, experiences of academic life, support and stress, show similarities as non-native speakers of English and differences in individual participant's socio-cultural and private life contexts. For example, Chiharu feels that having a doctoral degree is important for her identity as a member of a doctors' family. It is important to notice that her learning experience in the United States made her feel interested in teaching English communicatively, which later led her to seek higher education in the field of TESOL and found her own English school.

Ai's transformation to academic oriented person was significant. Soon after she entered the program, she found her interest in gender issues in education and feminism. In her case, it is clear that having been involved in the academic context, conducting research and interacting with other researchers encouraged her change. In order to keep up with the study in the program and to conduct research, all of the participants have great difficulty finding the time and sacrifice some important parts of their lives, such as reducing family time and sleep, which differ depending on their situations. Some of the participants have difficulty even telling other people that they are studying in the doctoral

program because of the traditional Japanese cultural norms, which still function today to inhibit Japanese women from having higher degrees of education.

Nevertheless, they work hard to study using English in order to deepen their knowledge for teaching and research, and find professional value in doing so. Having experiences of studying with the other cohort members, giving presentations in the courses of the doctoral program, and participating in academic conferences, they are gradually transforming into academically oriented individuals. All of the participants think that they will continue to learn throughout their lives. This study is still in progress. However, we hope that our findings are of value to those concerned with women's education having the situated information about how these Japanese women transform themselves into academically oriented persons, what difficulties they face, how support from their family members, cohort members, professors and coworkers are important for them, and how the Japanese culture influences their lives.

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