

Coping, Connecting, and Transforming: An M-GTA Analysis of International Graduate Students' Pandemic Experiences in Japan

Abstract

Research Overview

This comparative study employs the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA) to analyze how 16 international graduate students in Japanese humanities programs navigated the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023). Comparing Japanese-proficient and English-oriented groups across four universities, it theorizes divergent pathways of coping, network mobilization, and long-term transformation shaped by host-language proficiency.

Purpose of Study

The COVID-19 pandemic generated compounding crises for international students globally — research disruption, economic hardship, social isolation, and restricted mobility. While substantial literature documents these impacts, comparatively little attention has been paid to how host-country language proficiency mediates students' capacity to access support systems and construct resilience in a non-English-medium context.

This study addresses that gap by examining how 16 international graduate students enrolled in humanities and social science programs at four Japanese universities experienced and responded to the pandemic between 2020 and 2023. The study pursues three specific aims: (1) to identify the typology and structure of difficulties experienced;

(2) to clarify the coping strategies and social resources mobilized; and (3) to elucidate the longer-term transformations in wellbeing, career trajectories, and settlement intentions that emerged through the crisis. A central analytical focus is the comparative dimension: by contrasting a Japanese-proficient group (n=7, JLPT N1 equivalent) and an English-oriented group (n=9, predominantly lower Japanese proficiency), the study examines how a single attribute — host-country language competence — structurally differentiated the entire coping process and its outcomes.

Research Methods

The researchers adopted a qualitative research design, employing the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA) developed by Kinoshita (2003, 2020). M-GTA was selected for its capacity to theorize dynamic, process-oriented phenomena within social contexts, and for its methodological emphasis on the analytical focus person as a unit that defines the scope of concept generation.

The researchers first conducted two independent M-GTA analyses separately: one for the Japanese-proficient group (JP group; n=7) and one for the English-oriented group (EN group; n=9). Each analysis generated 13 concepts organized into five categories through semi-structured interviews, verbatim transcription, analytical worksheet creation, and constant comparative analysis. Theoretical saturation was assessed at both the concept and framework levels following Kinoshita's (2016) dual-saturation criteria. A subsequent comparative meta-analysis was applied across the two completed analyses to identify universal, contextually divergent, and group-specific domains. Participants representing nine countries of origin (including China, Indonesia, Russia, Bangladesh,

Italy, Turkey, Slovenia, the Philippines, and Myanmar) enrolled at four national and private Japanese universities.

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis identified three structural domains. First, a universal domain of shared experiences confirmed that mobility restrictions, family separation anxiety, informal peer network mobilization, and mental health deterioration occurred across both groups, regardless of language background. These phenomena constitute the common core of the international student crisis experience in pandemic-era Japan.

Second, a contextually divergent domain revealed systematic differences shaped by language proficiency. The JP group generated a distinct category — Proactive Utilization of Public and Institutional Resources — comprising active information-seeking, uptake of governmental and university financial support, and adaptive coping behaviors. This category had no structural equivalent in the EN group. For JP participants, Japanese language competence functioned as a resource: it enabled direct access to formal support mechanisms, integration into local social networks extending beyond co-national communities, and substantive supervisor–student communication that buffered academic and psychological deterioration. For EN participants, language functioned as a barrier: a group-specific concept, Fear of Infection and Anxiety over Medical Access, emerged from the inability to access Japanese-language health information, and trusted interpersonal support was largely confined to supervisors rather than distributed across community relationships.

Third, the most theoretically significant finding concerned the divergent direction of long-term transformation. JP participants predominantly reported strengthened commitment to remaining in Japan, driven by direct experiences of institutional support and, for some, disillusionment with home-country governance. EN participants reported weakened belonging and psychological distancing from Japanese society, arising from experiences of institutional exclusion and the visibility of foreigner-targeted policy responses during the crisis. These outcomes were not incidental: they reflect a structural mechanism in which host-language proficiency determined whether the pandemic was experienced from within or outside Japanese society's support systems, thereby amplifying integration or alienation, respectively.

These findings carry implications for international student support policy beyond Japan. Multilingual crisis communication, structured supervisory development for international student advising, and host-language integration support emerge not merely as welfare measures but as determinants of long-term social belonging and human capital retention in international higher education.

Keywords: international graduate students in Japan, Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA), COVID-19 pandemic, host-language proficiency, resilience