



Pre-Departure Preparation and Cross-Cultural Communication in the Silapatsat Abroad Internship Program: A Case Study of Fourth-Year Japanese Major Students at Rangsit University

Piyasuda Mawai, Achara Hotrabhavananda, and Vorapon Mahakaew

College of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

Corresponding author, E-mail: worapon.m@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

International internships provide valuable opportunities for intercultural learning; however, they also present challenges in terms of cultural assimilation and workplace communication. This qualitative study examines the experiences of fourth-year Japanese major students from the College of Liberal Arts at Rangsit University who participated in long-term internships in Japan. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest that students initially encountered obstacles related to high-context communication, workplace hierarchy, and cultural expectations. Nevertheless, mentorship from Japanese colleagues, observational learning, and prior preparation facilitated gradual cultural assimilation. The internship experience facilitated the development of professional awareness, communicative confidence, and intercultural competence. The study emphasizes the importance of structured internship programs and pre-departure preparation in enabling students to successfully integrate into Japanese professional environments.

Keywords: *Culture Shock; Cross-Cultural Communication; Professional Internship; Japanese Workplace; Pre-Departure Preparation*

1. Introduction

The importance of overseas internship programs in higher education has increased significantly, particularly in language-related fields that prepare students for globalized and intercultural professional environments. Klasek (1992) and Jensen (2021), as cited in Chen (2025), emphasized that international internships should not be treated as merely opportunities for technical skill development. Rather, they should be perceived as experiential learning environments in which students interact directly with unfamiliar linguistic practices, cultural norms, and professional expectations through authentic workplace participation. Internships are therefore complex learning environments that integrate language use, cultural norms, and professional identity.

In the Japanese context, workplace communication is influenced by distinctive sociocultural characteristics, including hierarchical organizational structures, indirect communication patterns, and strong expectations of self-regulation and discipline. Research has shown that effective communication in Japanese professional settings can be difficult even for learners with relatively high levels of grammatical knowledge. These challenges include difficulties in interpreting implicit messages, responding appropriately to senior–junior relationships, and understanding workplace silence (Hashimoto & Disbray, 2023; Zin, 2023, as cited in Chen, 2025). These challenges underscore the limitations of classroom-based language instruction in preparing learners for professional settings that require operation in high-context environments.

Empirical research on practicum students suggests that cultural comprehension varies across different domains. Internship students generally demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of Japanese culture and everyday communication practices, as suggested by Diner et al. (2025). (Diner et al., 2025). Nevertheless, their understanding of workplace-specific culture, including professional etiquette, discipline, organizational hierarchy, and reporting systems. Earlier studies have also noted that cultural knowledge acquired through textbooks and formal instruction often remains superficial unless it is reinforced through sustained experiential learning in authentic contexts (Syafryadin & Boulahnane, 2021, as cited in

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Diner et al., 2025). From an intercultural learning perspective, international internships in Japan have been conceptualized as sites of continuous negotiation and identity formation. Chen (2025) demonstrates that students' internship experiences require ongoing adaptation to workplace communication norms, implicit expectations, and professional roles, particularly during extended engagement in Japanese organizational environments. Students' learning processes are often characterized by an initial period of uncertainty and unease, followed by the gradual development of professional self-concept, confidence, and communicative awareness, rather than following a linear trajectory. The results of this study suggest that internships have a significant influence on the development of students' professional identities and intercultural competence.

Numerous scholars have emphasized the importance of institutional support mechanisms prior to and during international internships due to the communicative and cultural barriers commonly found in Japanese workplace environments. Chen (2025) notes that students' anxiety may be exacerbated and their adaptation processes delayed during the initial phases of overseas internships due to inadequate cultural briefing and pragmatic preparation. In the same vein, Diner et al. (2025) argue that Japanese language education programs should more explicitly integrate workplace culture and professional communication into internship preparation to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world professional practice.

Fourth-year Japanese major students at Rangsit University are required to complete long-term internships in Japan as part of their academic and cooperative education pathways. Prior to departure, students participate in structured pre-departure sessions that address Japanese workplace culture, professional behavior, communication norms, and hierarchical relationships. The purpose of these preparatory activities is to equip students with a solid foundation in cultural understanding and realistic expectations prior to their entry into authentic Japanese workplace environments.

Nevertheless, there is limited qualitative research examining students' perspectives on these preparatory processes and their impact on lived experiences during long-term internships in Japan, despite the recognized importance of such preparation. For example, there is limited empirical research on how pre-departure preparation influences students' communicative practices during long-term placements, reduces culture shock, and facilitates cultural assimilation.

The objective of the current study is to examine the cross-cultural communication experiences of fourth-year Japanese major students at Rangsit University who have completed long-term internships in Japan. This study is informed by the insights of Chen (2025) and Diner et al. (2025). It further aims to examine how pre-departure preparation facilitates cultural adjustment, reduces culture shock, and contributes to the development of communicative competence, a professional mindset, and intercultural awareness in authentic Japanese workplace settings. This is achieved by focusing on students' perspectives.

2. Purposes

The study aims to explore students' experiences of cross-cultural communication in Japanese internship settings. It also aims to identify key cultural and communicative challenges encountered during workplace integration. It further aims to examine the perceived role of pre-departure preparation in facilitating adjustment. It additionally aims to analyze changes in students' confidence, professional identity, and intercultural competence following the internship experience.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants

The study involved five fourth-year undergraduate students majoring in Japanese at the College of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University, Thailand. They participated in long-term internship programs in Japan as part of their academic and cooperative education requirements. A purposive sampling approach was used to select participants whose internship experiences involved sustained and intensive engagement in Japanese workplace environments.

All participants completed internships lasting six months to one year. This prolonged period of placement enabled students to move beyond initial cultural adjustment and fully engage with Japanese professional practices, workplace communication norms, and organizational protocols. This extended period



of immersion yielded a wealth of experiential data concerning the development of professional identity, adaptation processes, and cross-cultural communication.

The internship placements were situated in Japan's hospitality and service sectors, including hotels and food and beverage establishments. During the internship, participants were required to use Japanese as their primary language of communication in daily work tasks, interactions with supervisors and colleagues, and customer service situations.

The program at Rangsit University organized structured pre-departure preparation sessions for all participants. These sessions focused on practical aspects of living and working in Japan, including professional etiquette, communication norms, hierarchical relationships, and workplace culture. Most participants had limited prior experience using Japanese in authentic professional contexts, despite their extensive study of the Japanese language and culture in academic settings.

At the time of data collection, all participants engaged in a thorough reflection on their experiences across various phases of adaptation, including initial culture shock, long-term adjustment, and professional development. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation in the study was voluntary. To ensure ethical research practices, pseudonyms were used, and identifying information about individuals and host organizations was excluded.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The timing of the interviews enabled participants to reflect critically on their experiences and articulate perceived changes over time. Each interview was conducted in Thai to ensure depth of expression. Interview prompts focused on workplace communication, cultural challenges, interactions with Japanese colleagues, pre-departure preparation, and perceived personal and professional development.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The analytical process involved repeated readings of the transcripts, initial coding of meaningful units, categorization of codes into broader themes, and iterative refinement of these themes. Attention was given to recurring patterns across participants as well as variations in individual experiences. This approach enabled an in-depth interpretation of how students navigated cross-cultural communication and how pre-departure preparation influenced their adjustment processes.

4. Findings

The analysis of the interview data revealed a complex and multifaceted picture of students' internship experiences in Japan. Rather than following a linear process of adjustment, students' experiences were characterized by gradual negotiation, reflection, and transformation. Four interrelated themes emerged from the data, illustrating how students navigated cross-cultural communication, workplace expectations, and personal development during their internships.

4.1 Initial Encounters with High-Context Communication

A prominent theme that emerged among participants was the challenge of adapting to Japanese high-context communication. During the initial stages of their internships, students frequently reported confusion regarding feedback, expectations, and instructions. Supervisors typically provided minimal explicit guidance, instead relying on implicit cues, observation, and demonstration.

This adjustment process is further illustrated by the interview data. One participant noted that working in Japan required adaptation to a significantly different communication style and way of life. They observed that "life here is very different from Thailand, especially in terms of language and ways of living." This statement reflects the participants' early recognition of cultural and communicative distinctions, differences, which often led to self-doubt and uncertainty.



Over time, students developed the ability to interpret meaning beyond explicit verbal communication. This change suggests that students' pragmatic competence gradually improved and they developed the ability to rely on contextual cues, including tone, behavior, and situational norms.

4.2 Navigating Hierarchy and Professional Relationships

Another significant theme was the hierarchical structure of Japanese workplace relationships. Students consistently emphasized the importance of respect for authority, discipline, and seniority. Participants reported that they learned primarily through careful observation and imitation of senior colleagues, rather than through active questioning or in open discussion.

This pattern of behavioral adaptation is further supported by interview data. One student explained that, in contrast to Thailand, living and working in Japan required full accountability for daily responsibilities, stating that "here, I am responsible for everything on my own." This reflects a transition toward greater autonomy and a deeper understanding of expected responsibilities within structured organizational settings.

Additionally, students reported becoming more meticulous and cautious in their actions. Discipline, precision, and respect for organizational hierarchy became **integral** components of their professional identity. These experiences contributed to a deeper understanding of professionalism.

4.3 The Role of Pre-Departure Preparation in Reducing Culture Shock

Students' ability to negotiate cultural differences was significantly influenced by their pre-departure preparation. Participants who attended orientation sessions and preparatory guidance reported being better prepared to anticipate changes in communication styles, workplace expectations, and daily routines.

Although preparation did not entirely eliminate culture shock, it did provide students with a cognitive framework that enabled them to interpret unfamiliar experiences more effectively. Students were able to attribute challenges to cultural differences and adjust their behavior accordingly, rather than perceiving these challenges as personal failures.

Throughout the internship period, this cognitive reframing process was essential for these challenges' motivation and emotional stability.

4.4 Development of Linguistic Confidence and Communicative Agency

In authentic workplace contexts, all participants reported significant improvements in their language skills, particularly in listening and speaking. Students were required to interpret natural speech, regional variations, and context-dependent expressions during their daily interactions with Japanese colleagues and customers.

This development is reflected in participants' self-assessment. One student reported that their perceived language proficiency increased from "5 out of 10" before the internship to "8 out of 10" after only two months. This rapid improvement underscores the substantial impact of immersive, real-world language use.

Additionally, a strong relationship was observed between linguistic development and an increase in communicative agency. Students gained greater confidence in their ability to initiate conversations, ask questions, and respond appropriately in professional environments. This change was often accompanied by increased self-efficacy and a reduced fear of making mistakes.

4.5 Transformation of Mindset and Professional Identity

In addition to their linguistic and communicative development, participants reported significant changes in their self-perception and mindset. Their experiences in Japanese workplaces led to increased emotional maturity, responsibility, and discipline.

The development of a sense of gratitude and responsibility toward family was a particularly important aspect of this transformation. As part of their initial earnings, many students reported sending money to their parents. One participant explained that this action was intended to "give back to my parents



who raised me.” This reflects not only financial independence but also emotional development and moral awareness.

Furthermore, students reassessed their understanding of professionalism and work. Tasks that were initially perceived as straightforward, such as working in a restaurant, were later recognized as complex processes requiring precision, coordination, and accountability. Overall, these experiences facilitated a broader transformation that extended beyond the workplace, shaping students' perspectives on intercultural engagement, learning, and life.

5. Discussions and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the complex and non-linear dynamics of cross-cultural adjustment experienced by fourth-year Japanese major students during extended internships in Japan. Rather than progressing through a simple sequence of adaptation stages, students engaged in continuous negotiation, reflection, and recalibration of their communicative practices, professional behaviors, and self-perceptions. This pattern is consistent with Chen's (2025) characterization of international internships in Japan as intercultural learning experiences, in which students progressively develop their awareness and skills through engagement in authentic workplace settings.

One of the most significant findings is that students initially struggled to adapt to Japanese high-context communication. The students in this study, similar to those in Chen's (2025) research, were perplexed by the lack of verbal feedback, indirect instructions, and workplace silence. Initially, students lacked confidence in their abilities and performance due to these communicative characteristics, which are deeply embedded in Japanese professional environments. Over time, students developed the ability to interpret meaning by observing how individuals interact, as well as their body language and timing. This transformation indicates that students became increasingly aware of the pragmatic use of language, rather than merely their ability to articulate it accurately. This finding supports previous research suggesting that effective communication in Japanese workplaces requires an understanding of the context of meaning and the unspoken norms (Hashimoto & Disbray, 2023; Zin, 2023, as cited in Chen, 2025).

The results also highlight the significance of hierarchy in shaping students' professional development and communication. Consistent with Chen (2025) and Diner et al., (2025), students reported that Japanese workplace relationships are structured around seniority and clearly defined roles, requiring careful attention to the timing and manner of communication. The primary method of learning was observation, rather than direct questioning, which differs significantly from the typical classroom environment. Initially, some students perceived these expectations as overly strict; however, they gradually came to view hierarchy as a mechanism for maintaining group harmony, discipline, and accountability. This process of professional socialization enhanced students' understanding of the concept of professionalism in a Japanese cultural context.

The analysis of pre-departure preparation as a mitigating factor in culture shock represents a significant contribution of this study. Students consistently reported that the orientation sessions helped them contextualize unfamiliar experiences and manage emotional responses during the initial phases of the internship. Although preparation did not eliminate cultural challenges, it played a crucial role in supporting early adaptation. This finding supports Chen's (2025) assertion that an inadequate cultural orientation can exacerbate anxiety and impede adaptation, as well as Diner et al.'s (2025) claim that workplace culture is often the most misunderstood aspect among internship students. The current study extends these insights by demonstrating that pre-departure preparation serves as a cognitive and emotional framework, enabling students to reinterpret challenges as culturally situated rather than personally threatening, rather than merely as providing information.

The findings indicate that long-term internships led to substantial improvements in both communicative agency and linguistic confidence. Students reported that their listening and speaking abilities significantly improved, particularly when they were required to process natural speech, regional variations, and context-dependent expressions in real time during workplace interactions. These linguistic improvements were accompanied by an increased capacity to engage proactively with colleagues, clarify misunderstandings,



and initiate communication. This supports Chen's (2025) assertion that internships facilitate the development of effective communication skills by providing opportunities for engagement in real-world contexts. Additionally, it supports Diner et al.'s (2025) assertion that the most effective way to enhance communicative comprehension is through direct engagement in authentic activities.

The results suggest that students' professional identity and mindset, as well as their communication and language skills, underwent substantial transformation. Consistent with the identity-related outcomes outlined by Chen (2025), participants in this study demonstrated increased discipline, patience, and resilience as a result of adapting to Japanese workplace standards. By overcoming initial discomfort and uncertainty, students developed a sense of self-efficacy and maturity, enabling them to view themselves not only as Japanese language learners but also as emerging professionals capable of contributing to international work environments. This transformation reflects broader experiential learning theories which suggest that sustained participation in unfamiliar environments can lead to enduring changes in professional orientation and self-concept (Klasek, 1992; Mezirow, 1997, as cited in Chen, 2025).

The analysis of these findings supports the view that international internships should be regarded as structured intercultural learning experiences rather than merely employment opportunities. Previous research has identified varying levels of cultural comprehension among internship students as well as the challenges inherent in Japanese workplace culture. This study underscores the significance of pre-departure preparation in shaping students' adaptive strategies during extended placements. By emphasizing students' experiences, this study provides qualitative evidence illustrating the intersection of communication, culture, preparation, and professional identity development within authentic Japanese workplace environments.

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