บทความวิจัย (Research Article)

Challenges of International Internship in Japan: A Case Study of Thai Student Interns and a Guideline for an International Internship Training Course

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ (1) ศึกษาความท้าทายด้านวัฒนธรรมและภาษาที่นักศึกษาประสบระหว่างการฝึกปฏิบัติงานสหกิจศึกษาในภาคบริการของประเทศญี่ปุ่น (สนามบินและโรงแรม) และ (2) เพื่อเสนอแนวทางการเตรียมตัวนักศึกษาฝึกปฏิบัติงานสหกิจศึกษานานาชาติในภาคบริการของประเทศญี่ปุ่น การวิจัยใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ กลุ่มเป้าหมาย คือ นักศึกษาจำนวน 11 คนที่เข้าร่วมในรายวิชา JP499 สหกิจศึกษา (ในประเทศญี่ปุ่น) เป็นระยะเวลา 6–12 เดือน ในปีการศึกษา 2568 โดยคัดเลือกแบบเจาะจง เครื่องมือวิจัย ได้แก่ (1) บันทึกการฝึกปฏิบัติงานรายเดือน (2) การสัมภาษณ์แบบไม่มีโครงสร้าง (ออนไลน์และออนไซต์) (3) ข้อมูลสะท้อนกลับระหว่างฝึกปฏิบัติสหกิจศึกษา (4) รายงานการฝึกปฏิบัติงานสหกิจศึกษา และ (5) ผลการประเมินจากสถานประกอบการ วิเคราะห์และสังเคราะห์ข้อมูลที่ได้จากเครื่องมือวิจัย และตรวจสอบความน่าเชื่อถือของผลการวิจัยด้วยวิธีการตรวจสอบโดยกลุ่มเป้าหมาย (member checking) ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ความท้าทายที่พบมีลักษณะแตกต่างกับงานวิจัยก่อนหน้า โดยเฉพาะประเด็นด้านความพร้อมทางร่างกาย ซึ่งเป็นเงื่อนไขพื้นฐานที่สำคัญต่อการปฏิบัติงานและการปรับตัวในระหว่างการฝึกปฏิบัติงานสหกิจศึกษาในภาคบริการ (สนามบินและโรงแรม) ของประเทศญี่ปุ่น นอกจากนี้ กลุ่มเป้าหมายยังมีความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมองค์กรญี่ปุ่นอย่างจำกัด ทั้งในด้านการรักษาความกลมเกลียวของกลุ่ม การหลีกเลี่ยงการสร้างภาระแก่ผู้อื่น และการปฏิบัติงานภายใต้ระบบความสัมพันธ์เชิงลำดับชั้นขององค์กร ขณะเดียวกัน การใช้ภาษาญี่ปุ่นของกลุ่มเป้าหมายยังสะท้อนให้เห็นข้อจำกัดด้านความเข้าใจบรรทัดฐานทางสังคมวัฒนธรรมและความสามารถเชิงวัจนปฏิบัติที่จำเป็นต่อการสื่อสารในสถานที่ทำงานของญี่ปุ่น ในงานวิจัยได้เสนอ

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แนวทางการเตรียมความพร้อมการฝึกปฏิบัติงานต่างประเทศ ประกอบด้วยการคัดเลือก การเตรียมความพร้อมก่อนเดินทาง โดยเฉพาะการฝึกความสามารถทางภาษาเชิงวัจนปฏิบัติในบริบทการทำงาน และการสนับสนุนระหว่างการฝึกปฏิบัติงาน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งการสนับสนุนจากสถานประกอบการต่อการปรับตัวของนักศึกษาฝึกปฏิบัติงาน

คำสำคัญ: ความท้าทาย การฝึกปฏิบัติงานในญี่ปุ่น นักศึกษาฝึกปฏิบัติงานชาวไทย

Abstract

This study aimed to (1) study the cultural and linguistic challenges of international interns in the service sector in Japan (airport and hotel) and (2) offer a guideline for international internship preparation in the service sector in Japan. A qualitative research approach was employed. The interns consisted of 11 students enrolled in the JP499 Cooperative Education course who undertook internships in Japan for a period of 6–12 months during the 2025 academic year. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected from (1) monthly progress reports (2) on-site/online unstructured interview (3) host company feedback (4) final internship reports and (5) host company evaluations and were analyzed through the synthesis of information obtained from these sources. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through member checking. The findings revealed that the challenges identified in this study differed from those reported in previous research, particularly regarding physical preparedness. Physical readiness emerged as a fundamental prerequisite for effective job performance in service sector. In addition, the interns demonstrated a limited understanding of Japanese workplace culture, particularly with respect to maintaining group harmony, avoiding imposing burdens on others, and operating within hierarchical organizational structures. Furthermore, their use of Japanese reflected limitations in their understanding of sociocultural norms and pragmatic competence in Japanese workplace communication. Based on these findings, the study proposes a guideline for international internship preparation consisting of intern selection; pre-departure preparation, particularly the development of pragmatic language competence in

workplace contexts; and ongoing support throughout the internship period. The model also emphasizes the crucial role of support provided by host companies in facilitating interns' adjustment and successful internship experiences.

Keywords: challenges, international internship in Japan, Thai student interns

Introduction

Nowadays, the world is characterized by VUCAD conditions—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and disruption—which create significant challenges for both education systems and the labor market. One key challenge is the demographic shift toward aging societies, which has led countries like Japan to recruit foreign workers through programs such as JIP (Japan Internship Program) and TITP (Technical Intern Training Program). This trend highlights the need for educational institutions to prepare international student interns (hereafter, "interns") for cross-cultural environments by developing language proficiency, intercultural communication, and adaptability.

In general, as mentioned in Messelink et al. (2015), during international internships, interns may encounter difficulties, stress, and conflicts as they navigate their sense of identity with employers, local people, and fellow international participants. At the same time, these experiences can foster more positive perspectives on intercultural learning. Interculturality often takes shape when interns engage in critical reflection on their cross-cultural experiences, drawing on significant examples from their workplace settings

Previous research (Haryanti, 2024; Wu et al., 2025) have summarized the challenges and the difficulties of cross-cultural adjustment in internships undertaken abroad which include psychological stress, and are affected by the duration and intensity of cultural exposure, intrapersonal relationship, job performance, social support, culturally appropriate skill acquisition, and communication efficacy. According to Wu et al. (2025), intensity of cultural exposure refers to the degree and depth of contact an individual experiences with

the host country's cultural environment during an international stay. It includes the frequency, variety, and closeness of interactions with local people, institutions, customs, and social norms. High Intensity leads to high intercultural challenges. Situations include living with local host families or dormitories with host nationals, daily use of the host country's language, active participation in local workplace practices and community events, or being the only foreign worker among host nationals. Low intensity leads to low intercultural challenges. These situations include living mainly with co-national or international friends, minimal use of the host country's language, or limited participation in local cultural or social activities.

Wu et al. (2025) also mention a common challenge for international interns relating to their academic background. This is the gap between academic preparation and workplace demands, as success in foreign contexts often requires adaptability and problem-solving skills beyond traditional classroom learning. This mismatch frequently compels students to adjust quickly to unfamiliar professional practices. To mitigate this gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations, one effective approach is to implement an intensive pre-internship preparation program. Black et al. (1991) proposed a comprehensive model of international adjustment that highlights three interrelated phases through which individuals adapt to cross-cultural environments, as follows.

1. Anticipatory Adjustment: This phase refers to individuals' psychological preparation for the anticipated demands of a foreign environment before entering the host country. It is influenced by selection factors (e.g. language skills, personality, and cross-cultural competence) and pre-departure training (e.g. cultural orientation and job preparation), which help reduce uncertainty and facilitate smoother adaptation upon arrival.

2. In-country Adjustment: This phase involves adapting to the realities of living and working in the host country. It is influenced by job characteristics, organizational support, non-work factors (e.g., family and social networks), and

individual attributes (e.g., coping strategies, flexibility, and cultural learning), all of which facilitate effective adaptation and help individuals overcome culture shock.

3. Final Adjustment: This phase is characterized by stable psychological comfort and the internalization of host-country norms. Individuals function effectively in their professional roles, experience greater cultural integration, and achieve successful long-term adaptation.

In the anticipatory adjustment phase, the selection process for international internships is crucial. Thai institutions use varying selection methods, including interviews by Japanese employers or instructors and evaluations of language proficiency and behavioral competencies, with decisions made jointly or by a single party depending on the internship context. A carefully structured system is essential for choosing suitable candidates for successful international assignments. While much cross-cultural research has concentrated on individual characteristics in the adjustment process, scholars also recognize that organizational factors play a crucial role in shaping interns' adaptation. Black et al. (1991) particularly stress the importance of selection systems during the anticipatory stage, underscoring the influence of organizational variables.

A review of relevant literature and research also indicates that social support during an internship's in-country adjustment period is equally important. Therefore, the selection process should also consider the choice of host companies, and specifically whether they provide elements of social support. Social support is essential for interns to adapt successfully to new environments, as it helps reduce feelings of isolation, depression, and loneliness.

Related Research and Research Gap

Multiple studies have examined Thai interns participating in international internships, particularly in the engineering and education fields. These internships often aim to enhance intercultural competence, professional development, and global career adaptability for Thai interns (Kattiyapornpong & Almeida, 2021; Witayarat & Bunnjaweht, 2024; Yamamoto, 2018).

Although previous research has examined Thai interns participating in international internships, these studies have been largely limited to the fields of engineering and education. They primarily focused on the development of intercultural competence, professional skills, and global career adaptability. However, there is a lack of research systematically tracking the long-term challenges and obstacles faced by Thai interns majoring in Japanese when undertaking internships in the Japanese service sector—including airports and hotels—and using this information to design preparatory training programs or pre-departure training as mentioned in Black et al. (1991).

According to Di Pietro (2022), many studies on international internships have pointed out methodological weaknesses, particularly the absence of true longitudinal or controlled research designs. Reviews synthesizing prior research on international internships similarly note that most studies rely on one-time surveys or retrospective self-reports. Although a limited number of studies have adopted longitudinal approaches to examine students before, during, or after internships, these investigations predominantly focus on general or clinical internships rather than international internship contexts (Lo Presti et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). Fully longitudinal research that tracks interns through the entire international-internship journey is still rare and has been explicitly identified as a key research gap.

Previous studies have also suggested the importance of preparing interns in various areas, such as integrating intercultural knowledge into regular curricula (culture into awareness) and enhancing global communication skills (Wu et al., 2025), among others. While these studies provide a broad overview, they lack specificity regarding what should be taught. For example, in the case of international communication or Japanese language communication, there is little detail on which aspects to prioritize—such as the use of honorific expressions, abbreviations commonly used in the hospitality industry, or specialized terminology.

In addition, most previous studies have relied on interns' self-reported perceptions obtained through interviews or questionnaires. Such data are based on what interns claim they do rather than what they actually do, and may therefore be affected by social desirability bias, leading interns to overestimate their own performance. Moreover, these data reflect only the interns' perspectives, a methodological concern also noted by Di Pietro (2022). To address this limitation, the present study incorporates the perspectives of internship supervisors or Japanese employers by analyzing internship evaluation reports and interview data, including host companies' suggestions for enhancing internship performance. Moreover, this study adopts a long-term longitudinal design, tracking interns over a period of more than six to twelve months.

Research Objectives

1. To study the cultural and linguistic challenges of international interns in service sector in Japan

2. To propose a guideline for international internship preparation in service sector in Japan

Methods

1. Qualitative Research: This study adopted a qualitative research design collecting from the international cooperative education internship. Data were synthesized and validated through member checking, following McKim (2023). A brief four-question interview was conducted in member checking process to confirm, clarify, and refine the researchers' interpretations of the interns' experiences.

2. Sample: The sample were selected through purposive sampling. The interns who undertook international cooperative education internships during the 2025 academic year were anonymized and assigned intern codes 1–11. This study was approved by the institutional human research ethics committee.

Table 1 Interns Characteristics

Intern No.	JLPT Level	Previous Experience in Japan	Intern No.	JLPT Level	Previous Experience in Japan
1	N3	No	7	N4	No
2	N4	No	8	N4	No
3	N4	No	9	N4	No
4	N4	No	10	N4	No
5	N3	No	11	N4	No
6	N4	No			

3. Research Instruments, Data Collection and Its Limitations: Data were collected in two phases—during and after the internship—using five instruments, as shown in Table 2. Although interns were required to submit monthly progress reports, their full-time work commitments resulted in limited time for reporting and, consequently, all incomplete submissions. Host companies also provided feedback and recommendations when intervention was needed to clarify expectations or resolve workplace misunderstandings. After the internship, all interns submitted final reports, and host companies provided final evaluations.

Table 2 Summary of Data Collection by Research Instrument (The numbers in the table indicate the number of submitted reports/records and interviews)

Host company	Internship Duration	Intern No.	Research Instruments					
			Data Collection During the Internship				Data Collection After the Internship	
			Monthly progress reports	On-site interview	Online interview	Host company feedback	Final internship reports	Host company evaluations
A	6	1	5	1	1	2	1	1
		2	1				1	1
		3	3				1	1
		4	1				1	1

Table 2 Summary of Data Collection by Research Instrument (The numbers in the table indicate the number of submitted reports/records and interviews) (continue)

Host company	Internship Duration	Intern No.	Research Instruments					
			Data Collection During the Internship				Data Collection After the Internship	
			Monthly progress reports	On-site interview	Online interview	Host company feedback	Final internship reports	Host company evaluations
B	12	5	1	0	9	4	1	1
C	12	6	1	0	2	2	1	1
		7	1				1	1
D	12	8	7	0	9	2	1	1
		9	2				1	1
		10	3				1	1
		11	2				1	1
		TOTAL	**27**	**1**	**21**	**10**	**12**	**12**

The monthly progress reports consisted of two main questions: (1) problems, obstacles, conflicts, or issues perceived as significant findings or learning points in their work, and (2) approaches to addressing these issues, including how they resolved the problems or managed their feelings and emotional responses.

The final internship reports, which interns were required to submit upon completion of their internships, covered the following topics: (1) language-related difficulties; (2) intercultural communication; (3) culture shock and cultural conflicts; (4) adaptation and coping strategies; (5) growth in intercultural competence; and (6) recommendations for preparing interns for overseas internships.

The host company evaluations were adapted from the COOP11 evaluation form, a cooperative education internship assessment form used by the university. The evaluation employed a four-point rating scale and comprised 17 items categorized into four main areas: (1) work performance, including the quantity and quality of work; (2) knowledge and competencies; (3) responsibility for assigned duties; and (4) personal characteristics.

The interviews were conducted using unstructured protocols, which allowed interns to freely articulate their lived experiences, perceptions, and reflections on intercultural challenges encountered in the workplace. Because of resource constraints, only one round of on-site, face-to-face interviews was conducted in Japan. On the process of analysis, the codes were clustered into broader categories of challenges that interns face: (1) how the intensity of culture affects internship pressure; (2) communication problems arising from the use of the Japanese language; (3) the role and importance of social support in the internship experience; and (4) other challenges found during the internship.

4. Background Information about Host Companies: Table 3 summarizes the background information of the host companies, including internship tasks, employee composition, accommodation, and internship duration.

Table 3 Host company information and internship tasks

Host company	Main internship tasks	Employee		Participating interns	Accommodation	Internship Duration (months)
		Local	Foreign			
A	cleaning , replacing seat equipment and consumables	80	50	No. 1-4	Separated apartment (No. 1) / shared apartment (No.2-4)	6
B	Housekeeping, kitchen duties, restaurant and customer service	30	1	No. 5	on-site accommodation (one room in the workplace)	12
C	Housekeeping, kitchen duties, restaurant service	60	5-6	No. 6-7	separated room in the same apartment	12
D	Housekeeping, kitchen duties, restaurant service	100	20	No. 8-11	same room in the same apartment	12

Results and Discussion

1. Cultural and Linguistic Challenges

1.1 Cultural Challenges

The issue that interns perceived as having the greatest impact on their internship experience involved differences in work culture. Japanese workplace culture was described as highly serious, orderly, and strict. The following excerpts illustrate actual situations experienced by intern no. 7 from monthly progress report:

"There was one time when the pantry on my floor was short of one lemon. The kakariin (staff member in charge) called and asked me to go downstairs to get it because I was the naimu (hotel internal operations staff) assigned to that floor. When I took the elevator down, I met the Japanese staff member who was responsible for packing shellfish and lemons. I told him that my floor was missing one lemon, so I picked it up myself and brought it upstairs. When I arrived, I saw the manager talking with the kakariin who had called me to get the lemon. The manager asked whether the lemon was complete now, and I told him that I had just brought it up. The manager then went back downstairs. Later, when I was taking the elevator down to take a break, I met the older man who handled the shellfish, and he scolded me, saying that I should not take items by myself. He said that I needed to inform the person in charge so that they could take it, because the manager checks inventory all the time. I was confused—how could just one lemon, just one piece, become such a big issue, even though the kakariin was the one who told me to go get it?"

"Another incident involved a yogurt cup that had a small piece of coriander leaf in it. The kakariin called me and asked me to replace the cup with a new one because of the contamination. When I took the cup downstairs to exchange it, I met the same older man who handled the shellfish. I told him that the kakariin requested a replacement because there was a piece of coriander in the yogurt. After I brought a new cup upstairs, he followed me up in the elevator holding another yogurt cup and asked me which one I had taken. He then replaced the cup I had just brought with the one he was holding. I was confused about why he needed to do that."

Why are minor actions such as "taking a lemon by oneself" perceived as problematic in Japanese workplaces? This may be due to underlying cultural norms relating to role allocation, responsibility, and hierarchical work structures. Japanese workplaces strongly value teamwork, harmony, and shared responsibility; unilateral

actions are discouraged, and employees are expected to consult with relevant team members before acting (Ligia et al., 2024; Morita, 2022).

In this context, instructing a subordinate to retrieve an item upon a supervisor's request is not equivalent to direct communication with the individual formally responsible for that task. Within Japanese workplace norms, formally informing the designated person in charge prior to taking action is regarded as a matter of professional etiquette and respect for clearly delineated work roles. Consequently, the intern may be criticized for retrieving items themselves rather than allowing the responsible staff member to do so, as Japanese organizational culture prioritizes formal communication and reporting systems in which responsibilities must be executed strictly according to assigned roles and reported through appropriate supervisory channels. As mentioned in Jain (2022), this practice is considered essential for maintaining work quality, accountability, and the ability to accurately report task status to supervisors. Such expectations are consistent with Japanese work culture, which places strong emphasis on clearly defined hierarchies and ranks.

Furthermore, even seemingly trivial issues, such as a small piece of coriander found in a yogurt cup, require careful attention. This reflects a strong orientation toward error avoidance, as even minor mistakes may be interpreted as a lack of attentiveness or professionalism. From a cultural standpoint, such oversights can undermine colleagues' confidence in an individual's work quality. Japanese workplaces therefore place greater importance on performing tasks correctly and in strict accordance with established procedures than on solving problems quickly or achieving immediate results. Small errors are viewed as potential indicators of neglecting team standards, which explains the emphasis on meticulousness and repeated checks.

The challenges encountered by the intern in this study are consistent with findings from previous research involving international students as well as full-time employees working in Japanese organizations. Suphachai and Suksamana (2024)

report that Thai workers commonly experience difficulties in areas such as communication, strict work regulations, cross-departmental coordination, and adaptation to highly structured management systems with rigorous quality standards.

In addition, the challenges identified were also attributable to the characteristics of the host companies, as indicated in the section on these companies' background information. Specifically, monitoring of interns placed at Internship Site B revealed that they experienced a significantly higher level of work-related pressure compared with interns at host company A, C, or D. Contributing factors included being the only foreign national in the workplace, residing within the internship facility, and the high expectations placed on the intern's ability to perform customer-facing duties. Furthermore, the relatively small number of employees at host company B (approximately 30 staff members) meant that daily work performance was highly visible; mistakes were easily noticed, and delays in responding when summoned were immediately apparent.

It can therefore be argued that host company B exhibited a high level of intensity of cultural exposure, which in turn generated substantial pressure on both the internship experience and the interns' adaptation process. This is reflected in the feedback and critical evaluations of internship outcomes during the first three to four months of the placement provided by host company B, as well as in the interview with intern no. 5, conducted after the Thai internship supervisor had received the feedback and critiques. One difficulty that intern no. 5 also reported was receiving comments about her selective eating habits and leaving food uneaten. However, in Japan, several studies show that not leaving food and avoiding waste are strong social norms in Japan, rooted in childhood education and cultural concepts (Kawasaki et al., 2022; Sirola et al., 2019).

In addition, the language barrier represented a significant obstacle. The extent to which language becomes problematic depends on both the assigned tasks and the surrounding work environment. For example, in the case of an internship at host company B where the intern was the only foreign staff member and had

frequent customer interactions, interns received considerable feedback on the use of honorific language as well as negative behavioral evaluations from managers. Such evaluations may reflect actual shortcomings, but they may also stem from expectations placed on the intern that exceed his or her status as a student intern.

In contrast, interns at host company D (a larger place employing over 100 staff, with a highly international workforce) reported fewer managerial comments on language or behavior. However, they faced challenges in adapting to the presence of other foreign colleagues. The differences observed between these two internship environments align with the principle of intensity of cultural exposure mentioned in Black et al. (1991).

Based on the background information of the host company and the analysis of monthly progress and final reports, interview, and evaluations, it was found that host company B presented the high intensity in cultural exposure that relates to high intercultural challenges, while host company D is in the low intensity in cultural exposure.

While international internships are widely recognized for building soft skills and adaptability, there is minimal research or recommendations which specifically addressing physical preparedness or the ability to work quickly. Most programs and studies focus on communication, cultural competence, and general employability skills. For roles where physical strength and speed is essential, targeted research and tailored preparation programs are still needed.

Based on follow-up observations of interns in service sector, challenges related to physical condition—specifically physical strength—and work speed emerged as salient issues. These factors should be considered either as components of pre-departure preparation or as criteria for intern selection. When interns were asked, “What do you think makes the work difficult, aside from language issues?”, one intern at host company A responded:

“It’s about physical strength and time. Recently, I’ve been assigned to the xxx position, where I have to carry a lot of blankets. At the same time, I constantly must think about what is

missing, how much is missing, and how much needs to be kept in reserve. There are also catering staff responsible for delivering supplies used on the aircraft, but they don't stay until the work is finished. So I must hurry to unload all the blankets first and then bring the missing items. If catering removes the jet bridge, there's nothing we can do anymore. It's quite stressful—even when I try to work faster, I really can't manage everything alone, so I must ask others for help. I'm still in the process of adjusting and think I need more time to get used to it."

In addition, at host company D, an intern similarly noted the physical demands of the work, stating, "I have to lift heavy items every day, to the point that I've developed more muscle." As winter approached and influenza cases began to appear among staff, host company D issued the following notice:

"……(sh**ō**ryaku)…… infuruenza ni natte shimau to jibun mo tsurai shi. Issho ni hataraku hito nakama ni mo kanari no futan ga kakatte shimau no de, zehi tomo fukurik**ō**sei o tsukatte yob**ō** suru y**ō** ni shite kudasai! ……(sh**ō**ryaku)……Mata tant**ō** no hakengaisha ni mo kono y**ō** na shiky**ū** seido ga nai ka o gokakunin shite itadaku no mo te ka to omoimasu. Ij**ō** nanitozo yoroshiku onegai itashimasu. (If you had influenza, it would be difficult for you personally, and it would also place a considerable burden on your coworkers. ……..(abbreviation)…… However, in order to avoid a reduction in your working days, we would appreciate it if you could receive the influenza vaccination at your own expense as a preventive measure whenever possible. You may also wish to check with your dispatch agency to see whether a similar reimbursement system is available. Thank you very much for your understanding and cooperation.)"

The recommendation that interns confirm whether their dispatch company provides a similar reimbursement scheme highlights the emphasis placed on maintaining interns' physical readiness for work. More importantly, it reflects a core Japanese cultural orientation toward collectivism and moral responsibility, in which individuals are expected to manage their health so as not to impose burdens on others. This norm is explicitly articulated in the statement, "If you were to contract influenza, it would be difficult for you personally, and it would also place a considerable burden on your coworkers."

Based on the data and analyses presented above, the key cultural challenges faced by interns can be summarized as follows: the hierarchical nature of Japanese workplace systems; the cultural environment, or intensity of cultural exposure,

which contributes to workplace pressure; the importance of physical stamina and work speed in the service sector; and the expectation that maintaining one's physical well-being is an essential responsibility toward the work team.

1.2 Social Support

As mentioned in Black et al. (1991), in-country adjustment plays a vital role in helping individuals manage culture shock and build effective adaptive functioning. Interns actively sought social support within the host country. Many interns reported forming close friendships with fellow international student interns who were experiencing similar challenges. For example, intern no. 1 wrote about her experience, as follows:

"During the first one to two months, I experienced severe culture shock.....Fortunately, some xx coworkers approached me, talked with me, and taught me various things. It felt like half of my stress was relieved."

These co-national and multinational friendships fostered a shared understanding of the adaptation process and facilitated the exchange of information, resources, and coping strategies. This finding is consistent with a previous study by Wu et al. (2024), which emphasized the important role of interns' social networks in providing both practical and emotional support during their international stay.

In addition, interactions with local individuals also contributed to interns' well-being. For example, in the case of host company B (intern no. 5), Japanese coworkers served as conversational partners, offering opportunities for informal communication and emotional reassurance. Based on the record of intern no. 5, the intern experienced a certain degree of stress when transferred to work at another location, explaining, "I felt a bit stressed because I hardly talked to anyone, except for the senior intern who was doing the internship with me. We talked mostly at the beginning, but later on we didn't really talk much. At my previous workplace, there were people who talked to me and gave me advice."

This finding supported the significance of social support in the host company. Interns need someone who shares a similar experiential background to listen to them. Although the findings of the present study are consistent with prior research

indicating that interactions with fellow foreign interns' function as a form of social support that relieves stress and psychological pressure, the results also reveal a more complex dynamic within multicultural workplaces. Specifically, relationships with foreign coworkers who occupy full-time employee positions—rather than intern roles—may introduce additional challenges during the internship experience. From the perspective of intercultural workplace dynamics and power relations, these difficulties can be attributed to hierarchical differences, role asymmetry, and unequal authority in task allocation and performance evaluation. Furthermore, variations in culturally embedded work expectations and communication styles, shaped by individuals' national and organizational backgrounds, may limit the supportive function of these relationships. Despite operating within the same Japanese workplace culture, the coexistence of multiple cultural frameworks can lead to misunderstandings and interpersonal conflict, thereby transforming potential sources of social support into stressors rather than buffers, as conceptualized in social support theory.

This complexity was evident in the records and interviews of interns at host company D. They described workplace interactions as characterized by a strong sense of kodawari, which was sometimes perceived as excessive or difficult to understand. As one intern explained, "It's probably about strictness—this kind of kodawari, where we don't really understand why there has to be so much of it. It can feel picky or fussy, although when the intention is positive, it means being meticulous and attentive to detail." Importantly, interns noted that such behaviors were not attributed exclusively to Japanese staff. Intern no. 8 observed, "It's not only Japanese staff; xxx country staff can be the same as well—very particular and detail-oriented." These comments suggest that interns interpreted strictness and meticulousness through multiple cultural lenses, rather than as traits unique to Japanese workplace culture. Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be argued that interns acquire not only an understanding of the host country's culture but also broader exposure to diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds.

The findings indicate that social support experienced by interns primarily derives from both fellow interns—particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds—and Japanese colleagues, who function as important support mechanisms during the internship period. Such support plays a significant role in alleviating anxiety and reducing workplace pressure. However, the data also reveal that, in certain cases, fellow foreign interns—especially those employed as full-time staff—may become sources of difficulty. These challenges often stem from differences in workplace cultures and the use of Japanese as a lingua franca, mediated by varying first-language influences, which can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Therefore, colleagues in multicultural workplace settings can simultaneously function as sources of social support and as contributors to cultural or multicultural challenges as seen in the case of host company D.

1.3 Language Challenges

This section outlines key language challenges faced by Thai interns in Japanese workplace settings, focusing on their developing pragmatic competence. Based on internship reports, interviews, and host company feedback, five recurring issues were identified. Together, these issues highlight the interplay between linguistic knowledge, cultural norms, and host company expectations in shaping effective communication.

1.3.1 Pragmatic Challenges in Acknowledgment and Response: Limited Use of Aizuchi in Japanese Workplace Interaction

The use of language for acknowledgment and response, commonly referred to as aizuchi and ukeotae (defined as responding in a way that aligns with the tone and flow of the other person's speech; responding when spoken to or questioned; verbal response) (Shinmura, 2021, pp. 9, 258). Feedback during the internship from host company A included the following comments:

"Shiji ya setsumei shite mo hannō mo nai to omowarete iru node, … (Even when instructions or explanations are given, it is perceived that there is no response…)" and "Kaisha no hito ni hanasareta toki wa, 'wakarimashita,' 'rikai dekimasen,' 'hai,' nado, aite ga kikoeru yō ni

hakkiri henji o suru koto ... o otsutae itadakemasu deshō ka. (When spoken to by company staff, please clearly respond in a voice that the other person can hear by using expressions such as wakarimashita, rikai dekimasen, or hai. Could you kindly convey this to the students?") "

The issue of required verbal acknowledgment was also reported in the internship records of intern no. 2 assigned to host company A, as illustrated below:

"Overall, my Japanese language skills did not improve significantly in terms of grammar through workplace use. The grammar I had learned at university was sufficient for performing my job without major difficulties. The main challenge was acquiring new vocabulary, particularly technical terms specific to the field, but after about two to three weeks, I became accustomed to them. As for honorific language, as I mentioned to my instructor during their visit, it was not used very often. It was used only occasionally, mainly in casual conversations unrelated to work after working hours, and even then, only basic polite forms were used. Regarding work culture, whether Japanese or non-Japanese, people are very serious while working. There is very little conversation unless it is necessary. When a supervisor gives instructions—for example, telling me to be careful, to wipe the seats properly, or to arrange items correctly—I am expected to provide a verbal acknowledgment such as hai、wakarimashita.....(abbreviation)..."

Practicing such forms of acknowledgment and response from the classroom stage, while explicitly highlighting their importance, can help reduce communication problems. As mentioned in Kaewkitsadang (2021, p. 125), Japanese individuals continue to hold a positive evaluation of both the use of and the users of aizuchi. In addition, instruction should clearly emphasize that the Japanese term hai does not function solely as an equivalent of "yes" or as a simple marker of acceptance. Rather, it also serves to express agreement or approval with the content of an order or instruction (utterance) from the interlocutor, which is often anticipated to some extent (Watanabe, 2013). Furthermore, hai is used not only to indicate agreement with the interlocutor's opinion, but also to signal an attitude of "I am listening" and "I am taking in what you are saying".

1.3.2 Pragmatic Challenges in Interpretation and Cross-Linguistic Influence: The Case of Daijōbu in Japanese Internship Settings

Situations of the using of daijōbu were observed from intern records no. 3 and no. 5. The situation involved purchasing items at a convenience store, where the intern, acting as a customer, paid at the cashier and was asked whether the intern would like a bag or not.

"I experienced culture shock during the initial period of my internship in Japan, particularly because of the indirect style of communication. For example, when I went to a convenience store, the staff asked whether I wanted chopsticks. I replied "daijōbu desu" meaning I did not want them. However, sometimes the staff still gave them and sometimes not. Later on, I just explicitly said whether I wanted them or not."

In the case of intern no. 5, the situation involved interacting with the guest in a hotel restaurant setting.

"Yes. I once made a communication mistake, which made me not want to talk to anyone and try to avoid conversations whenever possible. I also encountered a situation where I asked a customer if I could clear the table to serve dessert, saying "onabe to osara o osage shite mo yoroshii deshō ka". The customer replied "daijōbu desu." So I did not clear the table because I thought it meant "it's still okay, no need to clear yet." However, a Japanese staff member later asked and cleared the table. I was confused and asked my colleague, "Didn't the customer just say daijōbu desu?" The colleague explained that in this context, when the customer says "daijōbu desu," it means they are okay with us clearing the table."

What the intern understood by daijōbu desu was equivalent to the Thai expression "yang mâi pen rai / yang mâi tông kèp" (it's still okay / no need to clear yet). However, what the customer actually intended was "ok khráp / choen kèp dâi loei" (okay / please go ahead and clear). In other words, the utterance functioned as permission, equivalent to "mondai nai desu or sagete mo ii".

From these two situations, it can be concluded that both interns used daijōbu with a negative interpretation based on the Thai equivalent "mâi pen rai" (it's okay / never mind), which is one of the pragmatic meanings of this expression in Thai (Mekthawonwatthana, 2011; Panpothong & Phakdeephasook, 2014, as cited in Kasa, 2025). However, according to Kōjien dictionary (7th edition) Meikyo Japanese

Dictionary (Shinmura, 2021, p. 1753), the Japanese word daijōbu does not include a negative meaning. Its meanings are defined as; (1) a respectable, admirable man; (2) a state of being firm, secure, reliable, or safe; (3) certainly, surely, without mistake (used for affirmation).

Furthermore, the study by Kasa (2025) comparing the pragmatic competence of the Thai expression "mâi pen rai" between second-language learners of Thai and artificial intelligence (ChatGPT), found that Japanese (as well as Chinese, Korean, and French) learners of Thai did not use "mâi pen rai" as a form of refusal prior to instruction. This finding suggests that the use of "mâi pen rai" as a refusal strategy is not universal, but rather a Thai-specific pragmatic feature, combining indirectness with the avoidance of imposing discomfort[1].

The use of "mâi pen rai" as an indirect speech act is reflected in the statement by intern no. 3, who reported experiencing culture shock during the early stage of the internship, particularly regarding "indirect communication." The student interpreted daijōbu as functionally equivalent to the Thai "mâi pen rai", and thus used it to express indirect refusal.

Similarly, the case of intern no. 5 reflects a comparable issue. In this instance, the Japanese speaker used daijōbu in the sense of machigai nai (certain/okay), corresponding to meaning (3) in the dictionary, indicating acceptance or permission. However, the intern interpreted the meaning based on the Thai pragmatic equivalent "mai pen rai", leading to miscommunication.

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[1] However, the second edition of the Meikyō Kokugo Jiten Dai 2-han [Meikyo Japanese Dictionary (2nd Edition)] (2010) records daijōbu as carrying a meaning of indirect refusal. Since then, this usage has gradually become more widespread, particularly among young women, who frequently employ daijōbu to decline offers—such as refusing disposable chopsticks at convenience stores (Ozaki, 2016, as cited in Wang, 2024). Furthermore, a survey conducted by Kikuchi (2018) with Japanese university students examined responses to the question "Ohashi o tsukeshimasu ka ("Would you like chopsticks?"). Out of 87 participants, 55 reported using daijōbu with a negative (refusal) meaning. This aligns with the record of intern no. 3, who noted that "sometimes the staff gave chopsticks and sometimes they did not," suggesting inconsistency in communication. Such observations indicate that the use of daijōbu in contemporary Japanese society is undergoing semantic and pragmatic change, resulting in variability and ambiguity in its conveyed meaning. In particular, younger speakers appear to increasingly adopt daijōbu as a marker of refusal, thereby contributing to the observed inconsistency in communication.

1.3.3 Pragmatic Challenges in Refusal Strategies: Over-directness and Difficulty in Refusing Appropriately

Interns sometimes make excessively direct refusals without using mitigating expressions or language that signals cooperative intent in problem-solving. Intern no. 7 described this issue in the record as follows:

"Regardless of who actually makes a mistake at work, responsibility is often shifted onto foreign interns. For example, there was an incident in which plates that were not part of the dishwashing area (araiba) were brought down to the dishwashing section, even though no one knew or saw who had done it. However, the supervisor and Japanese coworkers blamed the intern directly without first asking whether I was the one who had brought the plates down. As a result, I told the supervisor and coworkers who accused me, 'watashi ja nai' (It wasn't me)"

This incident illustrates a case of negative pragmatic transfer as discussed by Takahashi (1996). Although the intern's utterance "watashi ja nai" was grammatically correct, it failed to conform to Japanese workplace pragmatic norms, which prioritize indirectness and harmony. The lack of social support and limited workplace interaction further constrained the intern's ability to employ mitigated strategies, leading to a direct denial that was perceived as inappropriate. This situation highlights how cultural conflict, insufficient immersion in the target-language community, and limited pragmatic competence intersect in the communicative experiences of interns in Japan.

The intern's direct denial should not be interpreted as a reflection of Thai pragmatic norms. Rather, it represents a simplified interlanguage strategy shaped by limited pragmatic resources, situational pressure, and incomplete pragmatic transfer. While Thai pragmatic norms generally favor indirectness and mitigation, the intern's utterance "watashi ja nai" reflects a reduction of pragmatic markers under communicative pressure rather than a direct transfer of L1 pragmatics. Therefore, the use of a direct denial such as "watashi ja nai" should be understood not as a cultural trait of Thai speakers, but as an interlanguage pragmatic phenomenon resulting from limited exposure to Japanese workplace discourse. This response is consistent with Takahashi (1996) in that the learner's level of contact with the L2

community remains insufficient, preventing the internalization of pragmatic norms and resulting in the use of minimal pragmatic strategies. The tendency to avoid from apologizing unless one is personally at fault may be a shared characteristic of foreign workers that Japanese people perceive as potentially problematic in the Japanese workplace. This contrasts with Japanese communicative norms, in which individuals often apologize first even when the fault does not lie entirely with them. As noted by Kopp (2019, as cited in Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020) in discussion of foreign colleagues, Japanese respondents reported that foreign workers did not take responsibility for their mistakes or offer apologies when they had done something wrong. Instead, they tended to make excuses or shift blame to others, which led to negative perceptions among Japanese coworkers. Kopp concluded that this situation arises because foreign workers do not share the Japanese concept of hansei, which the intern defines as "reflecting on what one has done wrong and thinking about how to improve." Having been trained to practice hansei from an early age, a typical Japanese employee, the intern explains, will immediately acknowledge responsibility for a problem and take ownership of it by offering a verbal apology—in some cases, even when the issue is not strictly their fault.

Based on the analysis of the interns' actual language use, it can be observed that they frequently lacked mitigating language that could soften the impact of a refusal, thereby reducing potential conflict or preventing the interlocutor from feeling uncomfortable. This difficulty was also evident in situations where intern no. 6 needed to refuse requests or disengage from interactions with customers or coworkers. Rather than deliberately refusing, intern no. 6 reported that he or she was unsure how to decline appropriately without appearing impolite or disrupting workplace relationships. Consequently, intern no.6 sometimes continued unwanted conversations or accepted additional requests despite being busy or having insufficient time. These cases suggest that the interns' pragmatic difficulty involved not only producing appropriately mitigated refusals, but also recognizing when and how a refusal could be formulated in a socially appropriate manner.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the interns' difficulties with refusal strategies occurred at both ends of the pragmatic continuum: some produced refusals that were too direct, whereas others avoided refusal altogether because they lacked the linguistic and pragmatic resources to decline without threatening interpersonal harmony. The issue, therefore, was not simply whether interns knew what to say, but whether they knew how to manage the interpersonal consequences of saying it in a Japanese workplace context. This tendency may be attributed to the fact that prior instructional practices have focused primarily on what to say. In contrast, communication in Japanese society—where cultural values emphasize harmony and social coordination—places significant importance not only on what is said but also, and to a considerable extent, on how it is said (Kiso, 2013, p. 1).

1.3.4 Pragmatic Challenges in Workplace Coordination: Absence, Apology, and Requests for Make-Up Work in Japanese Internship Settings

Based on interviews and an analysis of their reports, it was found that intern no. 1 became ill and was unable to attend work. The intern informed the workplace in advance via a text message and requested to make up for the absence by working an alternative shift. The following excerpts illustrate the language used in communication with the internship supervisor.

"**Intern:** Chotto kikitai koto ga arimasu ga, kono hi wa watashi shigoto ga dekimasu ka? (May I ask something? Am I able to work on this day?)

Host company: OK desu yo. Ganbatte ne. (OK. Please do your best.)

Intern: Ky**ō** gogo mo ikimasu. Sono hi wa nani shifuto desu ka? (I will also come this afternoon. What shift will I be assigned on that day?")

Host company: Wakarimashita. Nij**ū**-nana-nichi wa B/D de onegaishimasu. (Understood. Please work the B/D shift on the 27th)"

In Japan, work schedules are usually decided in advance. Making up for missed shifts depends on the company's flexibility. If the intern requests to make up for the absence and the supervisor allows it, this can be interpreted as positive: The intern is responsible and motivated to recover lost time. On the other hand, the intern may not fully understand Japanese work systems, which emphasize

following schedules and established rules. If the intern communicates politely and clearly, they may be viewed as hardworking and considerate. However, if the request for make-up work causes extra burden on the team, it might be seen as a lack of understanding of teamwork culture (wa), which is highly valued in Japan. This finding is consistent with the study by Suphachai and Suksamana (2024), in which interview excerpts highlight the underlying concept of teamwork culture, or wa (harmony), in the Japanese workplace.

(JC10) "I learned that notifying my supervisor in advance was not enough; I also had to coordinate my leave with my coworkers. Since then, I have always checked with them before submitting a leave request."

This previous finding suggests that successful workplace communication in Japan involves not only following formal procedures but also demonstrating consideration for coworkers through coordination and harmony (wa). An analysis of the intern's dialogue indicates the absence of an opening apology for the inability to attend work, as well as a lack of expressions reflecting hairyo hyōgen (considerate or mitigating expressions) toward coworkers, such as concern about causing inconvenience to the team. In addition, the request to work an alternative shift was made without the use of sufficiently polite, permission-seeking language.

An appropriate conversation should begin with an apology and a brief explanation to demonstrate a sense of responsibility, emphasize the intern's intention not to cause inconvenience to the team in order to convey consideration for teamwork, and subsequently be followed by a polite request for permission to work an alternative shift.

1.3.5 Pragmatic Challenges in Service Encounters: Apology and Problem-Handling Strategies in Japanese Internship Contexts

At host company C, intern no. 6 was assigned multiple roles, one of which involved serving as a front desk staff member responsible for guest reception. One situation observed involved a customer complaint regarding the presence of insects in a guest room.

> **"Customer:** D**ō**shite heya no naka ni mushi ga iru no! Dame janai. (Why are there insects in the room? This is unacceptable.)
> **Intern:** Saikin mushi ga ippai iru node, s**ō**jisan ni otsutae shimasu. M**ō**shiwake gozaimasen deshita. (Recently, there have been many insects, so I will inform the cleaning staff. I am sorry.)"

Based on an analysis of the dialogue, the response beginning with *"Saikin mushi ga ippai iru node" (Recently, there have been many insects)* is inappropriate in a hotel context, as it may give the impression that the hotel has a chronic or ongoing insect problem. From the perspective of customer service discourse, the response should begin with an apology and clearly communicate the steps that will be taken to resolve the issue, in order to reassure the customer and maintain trust. A more appropriate response would be as follows:

"M**ō**shiwake gozaimasen. Sugu ni kakari no mono o mukawasete kakunin sasete itadakimasu. Hitsuy**ō** de areba oheya no henk**ō** mo go-annai itashimasu. (We sincerely apologize. We will immediately send a staff member to inspect the room. If necessary, we can also arrange a room change for you.)"

In this case, although the intern's response includes an apology "m**ō**shiwake gozaimasen deshita" (I sincerely apologize), the preceding explanation "Saikin mushi ga ippai iru node" (Because there have been many insects recently) pragmatically undermines the effectiveness of the apology. According to politeness theory, complaints constitute face-threatening acts (FTAs), as they directly challenge the service provider's competence and responsibility (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In Japanese service discourse, such FTAs are conventionally mitigated through prioritizing apology and responsibility-taking, rather than explanation or justification (Usami, 2002). By beginning the response with an explanation that suggests insects are a common or ongoing issue, the intern unintentionally threatens the hotel's institutional face and risks escalating customer dissatisfaction.

The intern's utterance lacks this pragmatic function, as it neither reassures the customer nor signals prompt corrective action. Instead, it frames the problem as

an external and generalized condition, which may be interpreted as avoidance of responsibility.

In contrast, the revised model response demonstrates pragmatically appropriate strategies by (1) initiating the interaction with a sincere apology, (2) employing humble and deferential expressions characteristic of Japanese service encounters (e.g. kakunin sasete itadakimasu (allow me to check)), and (3) offering concrete remedial options such as an inspection or a room change. This sequencing foregrounds the act of apologizing, thereby prioritizing the apology itself, which is consistent with Sugimoto's discussion of Japanese apologetic behavior. As Sugimoto (1998, p. 262) notes, "the form of Japanese apologies ... is as important as, if not more important than, the content." Moreover, apologies should avoid providing explanations, making excuses, shifting blame to others, or minimizing the damage caused, as such strategies undermine the perceived sincerity of the apology (Sugimoto, 1998, pp. 266–267).

An analysis of language use observed during actual internship placements reveals recurrent issues in situations involving acknowledgments, refusals (particularly when denying responsibility for actions not performed), requests that affect a group of people, cross-linguistic influence, and apologies to customers. In these contexts, interns frequently employed linguistically inappropriate expressions, which may lead to workplace difficulties arising from pragmatic challenges of language. These findings indicate that existing pre-departure preparation programs for student interns in the Japanese context remain insufficient, particularly with regard to the development of pragmatic competence in language use.

In addition to the challenges associated with pragmatic language use, the nature of Japanese as it is actually used in everyday life can itself create confusion for interns who are not yet familiar with it. For example, as reflected in a record by an intern no.1 who has achieved JLPT N3:

"The problem is that Japanese people speak quickly and often contract or omit sounds, making it difficult to hear clearly. An unavoidable situation is listening to the supervisor's

morning briefing (chōrei), where the supervisor has a hard-to-understand accent and frequently contracts expressions, such as changing shite iru no to shiten no. After attempting to listen independently, making a rough interpretation, and then checking with others to see whether they understood it in the same way, it was found that the interpretations differed completely, involving both mishearing and the omission of important information."

The findings from the longitudinal tracking were further validated by the final internship evaluation feedback provided by the host employers. The employer comments clearly reflect the manifestation of both language (pragmatic) and cultural challenges in actual workplace interactions. Regarding language and pragmatic competence, several host companies noted a lack of clear verbal responses and daily greetings (aizuchi and aisatsu), with comments highlighting that interns were often too quiet or responded in a low voice (aisatsu ga naku, genki mo nai / koe ga chiisaku, aisatsu mo dekinai). Crucially, this lack of pragmatic signaling led host companies to misinterpret the interns' attitudes, assuming a lack of motivation (yaruki ga nai yō ni kanjirareru) or even hostility toward the host culture (nihon ga kirai na no kamo shirenai). This directly aligns with the research findings regarding the critical role of prompt verbal acknowledgments in Japanese workplace culture.

Furthermore, in terms of cultural challenges, while host companies acknowledged the interns' seriousness and ability to follow instructions diligently (majime ni torikumu koto ga dekiru), They emphasized the need for greater proactivity (jihatsuteki ni kōdō suru beki) and better emotional and health self-management (shokuseikatsu ya taichō kanri). These evaluations corroborate the longitudinal observations that Japanese organizations place a premium not only on task execution, but also on proactive workplace integration (wa), emotional self-regulation, and physical readiness.

And Member checking revealed that interns confirmed that the findings accurately reflected their internship experiences. Overall, the interns considered the findings comprehensive and representative of the challenges they encountered, encompassing not only language difficulties but also cultural differences,

interpersonal interactions, workplace practices, and adaptation to Japanese culture. Three interns suggested adding further details concerning polite refusal, variations in supervisory styles and workplace strictness, as well as the nature of workplace reprimands and their potential impact on interns' emotional readiness to continue work.

Based on longitudinal follow-up, the improvement in the interns' Japanese communication skills was noticeably indicated over the course of the internship. However, their communicative competence remained context-dependent; while comfortable with occupational Japanese, the interns reported feeling less confident in non-work-related contexts, indicating that broader everyday conversational skills require further development.

It is acknowledged that it is not possible to design training content or preparatory courses that fully capture the complexities and demands of authentic internship settings. However, longitudinal research that follows interns throughout their internship experiences, particularly focusing on their actual language use in real workplace contexts, can provide valuable insights for the development of discipline-specific lessons or training programs. Such an approach has the potential to reduce the gap between internship practice and classroom-based learning.

2. The Guideline for International Internship Preparation

The findings of this study offer practical implications for enhancing international internship preparation and support. Specifically, it can provide systematic guidelines for intern selection, the design of pre-departure training programs, and coordination with host companies to establish effective support mechanisms throughout the internship period. The results further underscore the importance of targeted training in pragmatic language use, which is essential for effective workplace communication and performance in culturally specific professional environments.

2.1 Selecting Candidates for International Internships in the Service Sector

International internships are widely acknowledged for fostering adaptability and employability-related soft skills. However, existing research provides limited guidance regarding physical preparedness and the ability to perform efficiently under demanding working conditions. Most studies and programs prioritize linguistic proficiency, cultural competence, and general employability skills, while attributes related to physical stamina and stress tolerance remain underexplored.

Moreover, the literature on international internships rarely addresses explicit intern selection criteria. This gap may be attributed to the short-term nature of most internships, typically ranging from two weeks to six months (Di Pietro, 2022), and their close alignment with interns' academic majors (Galon, 2025; Tan & Umemoto, 2021). As a result, selection processes often focus narrowly on academic background and language skills, overlooking other attributes such as physical health, academic conduct, teamwork, adaptability, and stress management.

Based on the findings, this study argues that for Japanese-major students participating in long-term internships in the Japanese service sector, internal screening criteria prior to host-company interviews should be expanded beyond language proficiency. To increase the likelihood of internship success, the following attributes should be systematically evaluated:

(1) Physical stamina: the ability to meet the physical demands of the placement

(2) Academic conduct: demonstrated responsibility, attendance records, and engagement in extracurricular activities

(3) Attitude toward the internship: motivation, commitment, and professional mindset

(4) Resilience and stress management: the capacity to function under pressure, assessable through contemporary psychological well-being screening tools

Importantly, the criteria in (1) and (4) should be applied more rigorously than a general pre-departure health examination for overseas internships. In particular,

physical readiness should encompass not only basic health status but also physical strength, stamina, and agility required for daily life and potentially demanding work environments. For (4), psychological assessment by qualified professionals may also be considered to determine whether interns are adequately prepared to cope with prolonged periods of pressure and culturally intensive or unfamiliar environments.

2.2 Designing Pre-departure Training for International Internships

During the preparation stage, home universities should implement a structured pre-departure training program grounded in the framework proposed by Black et al. (1991) which identifies several essential components for successful international assignments, including language skills, personality traits (e.g. openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), cross-cultural competence, cultural orientation, and job-related preparation.

To effectively develop cross-cultural competence, pre-departure training should integrate pragmatic language instruction, with particular emphasis on politeness in language use. As defined by Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness can be understood as a linguistic strategy for establishing and maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships. In Japanese the word "politeness" is usually transliterated in katakana like "poraitonesu" to emphasize its broader scope that is exchanged and negotiated in accordance with the degree of social distance between interactants, and it also serves as a dynamic force that influences and reshapes interpersonal relationships. It is not only the use of honorific language, but also the forms of consideration appropriate to intimacy (Kato & Sawada, 2025, p. 57).

However, the language used by the interns during their internships tended to lack such politeness strategies and, in some cases, had the potential to negatively affect interpersonal relationships among co-workers.

Prior research identifies explicit pragmatic instruction as a particularly effective pedagogical approach (Ren et al., 2023; Taguchi, 2015). This approach involves direct explanations of pragmatic norms, sociocultural expectations, and interactional patterns. As is widely known and seen in the present study's findings,

in Japanese refusal situations, speakers are expected to apologize first—even when not at fault—and to propose cooperative solutions to maintain workplace harmony (wa). It is also important to develop interns' ability to interpret ambiguous expressions in Japanese, particularly those used for acceptance or refusal, such as ii desu, kekkō desu, or daijōbu desu.

A defining characteristic of explicit pragmatic instruction is the explicit comparison between interns' first language and the target language, combined with task-based practice in authentic contexts. Such training enables interns to develop pragmatic awareness and apply culturally appropriate language strategies in realistic professional situations.

2.3 Coordinating Social Support between Home Universities and Host Companies

Extensive research highlights the critical role of social support in international and cross-cultural contexts (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). In international internships, social support directly influences psychological well-being, intercultural adjustment, and learning outcomes.

Previous studies demonstrate that support from workplace supervisors, colleagues, and peers facilitates interns' adaptation to professional and cultural challenges (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Trinh & Tran, 2017, as cited in Wu et al., 2024). Interns who perceive higher levels of support report greater satisfaction, engagement, and professional growth, whereas insufficient support often leads to stress and adjustment difficulties.

Consistent with these findings, the present study emphasizes that social support within the host country is more effective than support provided solely by home universities. On-site mentors, senior colleagues, or peers of a similar age are particularly valuable, as they share the same sociocultural and organizational environment as the interns. Consequently, they are better positioned to offer contextually appropriate guidance, emotional support, and practical advice.

To ensure the availability of such support, home universities should require host companies to establish a formal mentoring or buddy system as part of the internship agreement. Clear coordination between universities and host companies is essential to define mentors' roles and communication channels. Additionally, assigning interns to host companies in pairs or small groups may further reduce psychological pressure by providing peer-based social support. Collectively, institutional, workplace, and peer support mechanisms contribute to more sustainable and successful international internship experiences.

It should be noted that the pre-departure preparation guideline proposed in this study serves as a preliminary conceptual framework synthesized from interns' firsthand experiences and employer evaluations. While this guideline offers comprehensive practical guidance incorporating physical stamina, pragmatic competence, and social support mechanisms, it remains a conceptual proposal that warrants further empirical validation and testing across diverse internship settings to confirm its applicability and effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study found that, although Japanese-major interns possessed basic Japanese proficiency, they often lacked sociocultural and pragmatic awareness, which could cause discomfort in workplace interactions. Unlike previous studies that mainly emphasized technical vocabulary, this study highlights culturally appropriate language use as a critical aspect of internship performance. Physical readiness and understanding of Japanese workplace culture—including harmony, avoiding burdening others, and hierarchical relationships—were also essential for successful adaptation. Based on these findings, the study proposes guidelines for intern selection, pre-departure training, and internship support, emphasizing the crucial role of host-company support. Overall, the study provides practical insights for improving the effectiveness of international internship programs.

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