# Learning from the Internship Program: The Cross-Cultural Adaptation Process of Indonesian Students during Their Internship in Japan

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**Abstract.** In today's globalized era, international internships provide students valuable professional and cultural exposure and present adaptation challenges. This study explores the cross-cultural adaptation of Indonesian Japanese Studies students during internships in Japan. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six participants and analyzed thematically. Findings show that students experienced initial culture shock related to work culture, language barriers, environment, food, and cultural habits. Coping strategies included observational learning, reflective practices, social media use, and support from peers and mentors. Successful adaptation was shaped by intrinsic motivation and career-oriented awareness. The study highlights the need for institutional preparation, intercultural competence, and structured support to enhance students' readiness for global engagement.

**Keywords**: Coping Strategies, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Culture Shock, International Internship, Japanese Workplace Culture, Thematic Content Analysis

## 1 Introduction

Internships are structured learning experiences that complement academic training by developing professional skills and easing the school-to-work transition (1–3). With globalization, internships increasingly extend abroad, enhancing employability, intercultural communication, and exposure to diverse professional systems (4,5). International internships also strengthen language proficiency, resilience, and global networks for students, while benefiting institutions through stronger academic-industry linkages and international reputation (6,7).

Cross-cultural adaptation is central to the success of these programs. Defined as a transformative process of functioning effectively in unfamiliar contexts (8), it is conceptualized through models such as Lysgaard's U-Curve (9), Kim's integrative theory (8) and Berry's acculturation framework (10). Thus, intercultural sensitivity and competence are essential (11).

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However, limited research addresses Indonesian students' adaptation during internships in Japan. Prior studies (12,13) highlight program evaluation and culture shock but rarely examine adaptation strategies in depth. This study fills that gap by investigating challenges, coping strategies, and key factors shaping the adaptation of Indonesian Japanese Studies majors during internships in Japan

## 2 Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian university students who completed internships in Japan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants majoring in Japanese language and literature. The selection was based on purposive sampling, ensuring participants had direct experience with the internship program and varied durations of stay.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted online via Zoom. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis process included data coding, theme identification, and interpretation based on relevant theoretical frameworks (8–10).

To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was conducted through participant validation (member checking), comparison across cases, and reference to institutional documents related to the internship program. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive view of the adaptation process, including encountered challenges, coping strategies, and success factors.

## 3 Results and Discussion

Interviews revealed that all six students experienced culture shock at the beginning of their placement. The term culture shock was first introduced by an anthropologist named Oberg in 1960 (14) culture shock refers to psychological discomfort caused by transitioning from a familiar culture to a foreign one for people who work, live, or study abroad. This culture shock stems from challenges they encountered in Japan, including the Japanese work ethic and practices, cultural habits, food, and natural environment. To overcome the challenges they face, they use coping strategies that are language-based, social, cultural, environmental, and reflective. As also conveyed by Huff et al. (15) and Peltokorpi (16), cross-cultural adjustment requires cultural intelligence, personality, and language skills.

**Table 1. Causes of culture shock experienced by interns**

| Code | Gender | Age | Level | Place | Barriers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| R1 | Female | 20 | 4 | Restoran | Japanese language; Work-related constraints; Cultural habits; Food; Natural environment |
| R2 | Female | 20 | 4 | Hotel | Japanese language; Work-related constraints; Cultural habits; Food |
| R3 | Female | 24 | 2 | Hotel | Work-related constraints; Cultural habits; Food; Natural environment |
| R4 | Male | 23 | 3 | Restoran | Japanese language; Work-related constraints; Cultural habits |
| R5 | Male | 21 | 4 | Restoran | Japanese language; Work-related constraints; Cultural habits |
| R6 | Male | 20 | 4 | Restoran | Japanese language; Work-related constraints; Cultural habits; Natural environment |

### 3.1 Language Barriers

Language always seems to be a barrier for interns who have not reached JLPT level 2. One of the challenges they consistently encounter is understanding Japanese words spoken too quickly. This difficulty stems from their lack of opportunities to talk directly with Japanese people.

The interview results in Table 2 show the strategies used by interns to deal with words spoken too quickly.

**Table 2. Strategies for Overcoming Japanese Spoken Too Quickly**

| Respondent | | Strategies |
|---|---|---|
| R1 | : | "I usually politely ask for a repeat if I really don't understand 100%. However, if I understand a little, I'll confirm that I understand correctly." |
| R2 | : | "...ask for a repeat. Of course, using polite language. I also practice by frequently listening to Japanese conversations on YouTube." |
| R4 | : | "...ask for a repeat. Sometimes I also ask them to use simpler language and slow down the tempo." |
| R5 | : | "...ask for a repeat. Rather than misunderstanding, the consequences would be more complicated." |
| R6 | : | "...ask for a repeat. It's actually just a matter of habit and anxiety. Because over time, we get used to it and can understand what they're saying." |

Another frequently encountered language barrier is vocabulary, particularly work vocabulary loaded with technical terms, the use of respectful language (keigo), idiomatic expressions, incomplete language, implicit expressions, and regional dialects. These obstacles, of course, are not encountered in the classroom; they are encountered only when they interact contextually with Japanese people at the internship. To overcome these obstacles, just as when facing the challenge of speaking Japanese too quickly, it takes courage to ask questions again from superiors or Japanese colleagues. To prevent similar incidents from recurring, interns also note or record vocabulary or language usage they find difficult, then study them online or discuss them with fellow interns or seniors when not at work.

### 3.2 Work-related Constraints

Work-related constraints are any obstacles or limitations that arise from the work context and can interfere with a person's achievement of goals or performance. The constraints referred to here relate to the work methods, norms, and values applied at the internship location. The Japanese work style, which is always based on standard procedures and always considers time efficiency, speed, detail, and precision, often presents a barrier for interns who are not yet ready for the work, especially in Japanese companies with high norms and values. The strategies interns use to overcome work-related constraints are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Strategies for Work-related Constraints**

| Respondent | | Strategies |
|---|---|---|
| R1 | : | "I try to adapt to their work methods by observing my seniors in action. It's difficult, but I'm always confident I can do it." |
| R2 | : | "I listen to my superiors' explanations when I want to do something different from what I'm used to. I often get scolded by my superiors for being slow, or whatever." "The point is, if I can't do it, I ask." |
| R3 | : | "Japanese people are rigid; they have to follow procedures. There's no room for initiative and creativity. It's difficult, but you have to adapt to the rules because you work in their company. You have to be patient, you know, dealing with it (laughs)." "I'm often called undisciplined, ha ha ha." |
| R4 | : | "I just follow the example." |
| R5 | : | "My superiors are fierce and often get angry. But I just listen, as long as I follow their guidelines and directions." |
| R6 | : | "I observe and reflect a lot. I don't repeat the same mistakes." |

### 3.3 Cultural Habits Constraints

Cultural habit constraints refer to difficulties arising from differences in everyday customs, social norms, and cultural values in the workplace and social interactions. Interviews revealed several recurring issues, as summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4. Strategies for Cultural Habits Constraints**

| Respondent | | Strategies |
|---|---|---|
| R1 | : | "There are actually many differences in customs with Japanese people, especially those I've experienced, such as time discipline, cleanliness, privacy—a lot of them."<br>"...what I do is observe their customs and try to adapt." |
| R2 | : | "At first, I often misinterpreted their body language. But over time, I got used to it." |
| R3 | : | "Their habit of speaking indirectly confused me. I often had to double-check what they really meant." |
| R4 | : | "There were so many. After eating, we had to clear the table, even in restaurants. The way we put our spoons down after eating was also different. I just watched and imitated them." |
| R5 | : | "I'm a smoker, so smoking is tough there. There seem to be many restrictions in Japan, especially regarding discipline. To the point where every time I want to do something, I have to ask permission from a senior or something." |
| R6 | : | "It's different in terms of discipline, cleanliness, and honesty. I follow their instructions because we're in Japan." |

Four key cultural habit constraints were identified: (1) discipline and regulation, (2) communication styles, (3) dining etiquette, and (4) broader values like cleanliness, privacy, and honesty. To address these, interns used varied coping strategies, including reflective learning through observation, problem-focused efforts to interpret communication, selective participation to comply with rules, and instrumental coping by following seniors' guidance.

### 3.4 Food

Food-related issues are another major source of culture shock for interns. These challenges are illustrated in Table 5. They commonly arise from difficulties in finding halal food, differences in taste, and unfamiliar table manners.

**Table 5. Strategies for Food Issues**

| Respondent | | Strategies |
|---|---|---|
| R1 | : | "This was the hardest part. I could barely eat for the first two months and was often sick. Besides the fact that many of the foods were non-halal, the tastes didn't suit me. Even now, I still haven't adapted to Japanese food. I cook for myself and bring my own lunch whenever I travel." |
| R2 | : | "The taste and etiquette of Japanese food really bothered me. Furthermore, I always felt anxious when eating out because not all food in Japan is halal. … I tried to convince myself to adapt to the tastes, but I tried to stay as halal as possible." |
| R3 | : | "Every time there was a gathering, there was always drinking alcohol. Because I'm Muslim, I had to politely but firmly refuse." |

Students faced three main food-related challenges: halal restrictions, taste adjustments, and alcohol-related practices. Coping strategies included problem-

focused solutions like self-cooking or bringing meals, reflective coping by reframing difficulties as cultural learning, and selective participation by politely declining alcohol while maintaining social harmony.

### 3.5 Natural Environment

Japan has four distinct seasons and is highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, and heavy snow. This stands in sharp contrast to Indonesia, which has a tropical climate with only two seasons and no experience of winter or snow. Such environmental differences often trigger culture shock among Indonesian students during their initial placement.

To cope with these challenges, students employ several strategies. First, they engage in information-seeking, consulting colleagues, seniors, or Indonesian student communities in Japan for advice on coping with winter, appropriate clothing, and disaster safety procedures. Second, they apply problem-focused coping, such as purchasing winter gear (heaters, thick jackets, skin moisturizers) and adhering to evacuation guidelines provided by local governments. Third, they rely on emotion-focused coping, strengthening their psychological resilience by reframing the situation as both a learning opportunity and a chance for personal growth.

## 4 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesian Japanese Studies students undergoing internships in Japan encounter significant adaptation challenges, particularly related to language barriers, work culture, cultural habits, food, and the natural environment. These initial difficulties often manifested as culture shock but were managed through diverse coping strategies, including observational learning, reflective practices, peer and mentor support, and the use of social media. Successful adaptation was largely shaped by students' intrinsic motivation and career-oriented awareness, highlighting the importance of personal resilience alongside external support systems. The findings suggest that higher education institutions should strengthen pre-departure preparation by integrating intercultural communication, workplace culture orientation, and survival Japanese into the curriculum, while host companies are encouraged to provide clearer guidance and mentoring to help interns navigate workplace norms and expectations. Establishing support networks, such as alumni mentors or peer communities, can further reduce adaptation difficulties and enhance the long-term benefits of international internships for both students and institutions. At the policy level, universities and relevant stakeholders are recommended to establish formal agreements with host institutions in Japan to ensure structured support systems, while national authorities may integrate intercultural training, language benchmarks, and

international internship outcomes into accreditation and quality assurance frameworks to reinforce their role in producing globally competent graduates. Future studies should broaden the scope of participants across institutions and countries, employ longitudinal approaches to track adaptation processes over time, and incorporate perspectives from host supervisors and local colleagues to enrich the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics and highlight mutual adaptation within international internship programs.

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