



THE ROLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS IN SHAPING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING (A STUDY ON STUDENTS OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION PROGRAM).

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how experiential learning through an internship program shapes the cross-cultural understanding of Japanese Language Education students at Universitas Negeri Jakarta. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach with methodological triangulation, data were collected from ten internship alumni via a Likert-scale pre-interview questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Initial findings revealed a significant gap between students' theoretical knowledge of Japanese sociocultural concepts and their practical ability to interpret implied meanings in a professional setting. However, Kolb's experiential learning cycle effectively bridged this gap, enabling students to transform concrete cultural clashes into abstract conceptualizations and active communication strategies. Furthermore, students' intercultural sensitivity shifted from an ethnocentric orientation to ethnorelativism, reaching the Adaptation stage of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The study concludes that internship experiences are crucial for mastering high-context communication concepts like *honne-tatemae*, thereby significantly contributing to the practical application of foreign language education.

Keywords: *Experiential Learning; Cross-Cultural Understanding; DMIS; Internship; Honne-Tatemae*

INTRODUCTION

Language learning is intrinsically tied to cultural understanding. The Japan Foundation (2023) reports that Indonesia consistently ranks third globally for the highest number of Japanese language learners. However, this impressive quantity often clashes with practical obstacles in higher education, where contextual speaking skills and cross-cultural

understanding remain significant barriers for students. In formal higher education, Japanese language learning is generally dominated by a "low-context" delivery approach, focusing primarily on structural linguistics such as grammar (*bunpou*) and vocabulary (*goi*). Students are taught what is said textually, but are rarely equipped with the ability to interpret what is unsaid contextually.

Both Indonesia and Japan are theoretically classified as High-Context Cultures. However, the manifestation and philosophical roots of Japan's high-context culture are far more rigid and institutionalized, particularly through the sociocultural concepts of *honne* (true feelings) and *tatemae* (public facade or social obligations). When students enter the Japanese industrial ecosystem through internship programs—a manifestation of the Kampus Berdampak initiative at Universitas Negeri Jakarta—they often experience culture shock due to their inability to read implied meanings.

To bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competence, experiential learning is deemed the most effective pedagogical approach. According to David A. Kolb, experiential learning involves a circular process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This study aims to describe the role of experiential learning through internships in shaping students' cross-cultural understanding of the *honne-tatemae* concept, and to analyze their shifts in intercultural sensitivity using Milton J. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach integrated with methodological triangulation. The research subjects were ten students (informants R1–R10) from the Japanese Language Education Study Program who had completed an internship program in Japan or at a Japanese company in Indonesia within a duration of 6 to 12 months.

Data collection was conducted through a two-step process: (1) a Likert-scale pre-interview questionnaire serving as baseline data for macro mapping, and (2) in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore the psychological dynamics and internal transformations of the students. The data were analyzed interactively using the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, the students' learning process was divided into four logical stages:

1. **Concrete Experience:** All ten informants experienced direct culture shock regarding the rigid Japanese work culture and *honne-tatemae*. For instance, Informant 4 (R4) witnessed a coworker breaking a plate but receiving praise from the manager, only to be smoothly transferred to another division the next day.
2. **Reflective Observation:** Students observed and analyzed the hidden meanings behind Japanese social facades. Informant 1 (R1) reflected that standard praises for foreigners, such as "*Nihongo wa jouzu desune*," were not literal assessments but instruments for psychological empowerment.
3. **Abstract Conceptualization:** Students formulated new cognitive frameworks. They conceptualized *tatemae* not as hypocrisy, but as a crucial diplomatic tool to prevent conflict, maintain group harmony (*wa*), and separate personal emotions from professional duties.
4. **Active Experimentation:** Students actively modified their communication strategies. Informant 9 (R9) utilized a "double-checking" strategy to penetrate the *tatemae* of local workers who pretended to understand instructions, while Informant 2 (R2) used strict formal language (*keigo*) to create a safe professional boundary.

The internship program successfully shifted the students' intercultural sensitivity from Ethnocentrism (Defense, Minimization) to Ethnorelativism (Acceptance, Adaptation) based on Bennett's DMIS framework. The study found that the "Denial" stage was completely skipped by all informants. This occurred because their formal academic background in Japanese studies served as cultural capital, eliminating initial cultural denial before departure. Ultimately, the students reached the "Adaptation" stage, evidenced by their ability to consciously code-switch their communication behaviors to fit Japanese norms without losing their Indonesian identity.

Furthermore, the study identified four main manifestations of *honne-tatemae* in the Japanese professional environment:

1. Implied criticism disguised as praise to save the employee's face.
2. Standardized praise for foreigners to encourage confidence.
3. Indirect rejections (using ambiguous words like "*chotto*") and indirect instructions.
4. Collective diplomacy for damage control, deeply tied to the *uchi-soto* (in-group/out-group) concept.

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning through internship programs plays a transformative role in shaping students' cross-cultural understanding. The program successfully bridges the gap between academic theory and pragmatic competence, allowing students to decode the ambiguity of *honne-tatema*. Guided by Kolb's experiential learning cycle, students transformed cultural clashes into adaptive communication strategies. Consequently, their intercultural sensitivity reached the Adaptation stage of the DMIS model. This successful cultural adaptation fostered remarkable resilience, proven by the fact that 100% of the informants expressed a strong desire to pursue future professional careers in Japanese companies.

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