

Cultural Understanding Level of Internship Students Japanese Language Learners at the Elementary and Intermediate Level

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural understanding is a crucial competency for students participating in international internship programs, particularly in Japan, which is known for its distinctive work norms and social values. This study aims to analyze the cultural understanding levels of students from the Japanese Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang who joined internships in Japan in 2023 and 2024. The data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 25 participating students. The results reveal that students' understanding of general culture was 24%, Japanese work culture 64%, and cultural aspects in Japanese communication 76%. The highest comprehension was in dining culture (92%), while the lowest was in workplace discipline (16%). These findings suggest a gap in students' understanding of both general and work-specific Japanese culture. Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on the need to integrate Japanese work culture education into university curricula, thereby holistically preparing students for the cultural challenges they will encounter in the Japanese workplace environment.

Keywords:

Cultural Understanding; Japanese Work Culture; Intercultural Communication.

ABSTRAK

Pemahaman lintas budaya merupakan kompetensi penting bagi mahasiswa yang mengikuti program magang internasional, khususnya di Jepang, yang dikenal dengan norma kerja dan nilai-nilai sosialnya yang khas. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tingkat pemahaman budaya mahasiswa

Program Pendidikan Bahasa Jepang di Universitas Negeri Semarang yang mengikuti magang di Jepang pada tahun 2023 dan 2024. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner yang dibagikan kepada 25 mahasiswa peserta. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman mahasiswa tentang budaya umum adalah 24%, budaya kerja Jepang 64%, dan aspek budaya dalam komunikasi Jepang 76%. Pemahaman tertinggi terdapat pada budaya makan (92%), sedangkan yang terendah pada disiplin di tempat kerja (16%). Temuan ini menunjukkan adanya kesenjangan dalam pemahaman mahasiswa tentang budaya Jepang secara umum dan budaya kerja spesifik. Secara teoritis, studi ini berkontribusi pada wacana tentang perlunya mengintegrasikan pendidikan budaya kerja Jepang ke dalam kurikulum universitas, sehingga secara holistik mempersiapkan mahasiswa untuk menghadapi tantangan budaya yang akan mereka temui di lingkungan kerja Jepang.

Kata kunci:

Pemahaman Budaya; Budaya Kerja Jepang; Komunikasi Lintas Budaya.

1. Introduction

Japanese language education in higher education plays a crucial role in producing graduates proficient in listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills. However, linguistic competence alone is insufficient. Intercultural competence, particularly an understanding of Japanese culture, is essential for preventing miscommunication, especially in real-world contexts such as internships or professional settings in Japan. As Kosareva et al., (2019) emphasize, language and culture are deeply intertwined; insufficient cultural knowledge may lead to misunderstandings when interacting across cultural boundaries.

In university curricula, cultural knowledge is often embedded within skill-based courses like *choukai* (listening), *dokkai* (reading), *sakubun* (writing), and *kaiwa* (speaking), as well as in culture-specific courses such as *nihonjijou* or Japanese pop culture (Zhang & Wu, 2023). Nevertheless, limited real-life exposure to Japanese societal and workplace norms may lead learners to misinterpret or violate cultural expectations. For instance, improper use of *ojigi* (bowing) or failure to use appropriate honorific language (*keigo*) may be perceived as impolite (Takiuchi, 2024; Takiuchi, 2024; Seregina, Zubanova, Druzhinin, & Shagivaleeva, 2019).

Prior studies (Syafryadin & Boulahnane, 2021) show that learners with less than 70% cross-cultural understanding experience frequent communication difficulties. Cultural aspects of Japanese can be broadly categorized into three: general culture (daily life), work culture (e.g., *horenso*, discipline), and communicative culture (e.g., use of *keigo*) (Hamano, Funaki, & Phillips, 2023). Among these, *keigo* is widely acknowledged as a particularly difficult yet essential element in formal communication (Takeuchi, 2021).

Despite its importance, many Japanese learners still lack sufficient awareness of workplace culture and communication etiquette (M, Hasibuan, & Nishikubo, 2024). While general cultural content is often addressed in class, work-related practices are rarely emphasized. This study addresses that gap by investigating the extent to which students who participated in internships in Japan understand these three dimensions of Japanese culture (Chen & Qi, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the level of cultural understanding specifically general culture, workplace culture, and communicative culture among Japanese language learners who undertook internships in Japan. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for curriculum development and highlight the need for a more robust integration of Japanese work culture into language education.

Another communication culture that learners often use is the *futsutai* form. Below is Table 1, which shows the difference between *teineigo* and *futsutai* (Kosaka, Saeki, Aizawa, Kato, & Nose, 2024).

Table 1. Difference between *Futsutai* and *Teineigo*

<i>Futsutai</i>	<i>Teineigo</i>	The Meaning
<i>Ohayou.</i> おはよう	<i>Ohayou gozaimasu.</i> おはようございます。	Good morning
<i>Arigatou.</i> ありがとう	<i>Arigatou gozaimasu.</i> ありがとうございます。	Thank you
<i>Ocha, nomu?</i> お茶、飲む？	<i>Ocha wo nomimasuka</i> お茶を飲みますか。	Have some tea?
<i>Kinou Ani chan ga konakatta.</i> きのうアニちゃんが来なかった。	<i>Kinou Deni sensei wa kimasen deshita.</i> きのうデニ先生は来ませんでした。	Yesterday, Ani/Teacher Deni didn't come.

Table 1 provides examples of differences between casual (*futsutai*) and polite (*teineigo*) forms in Japanese. While *futsutai* is used in informal situations, *teineigo* is required in formal contexts such as workplaces or when speaking to superiors. These distinctions reflect not only grammatical variation but also levels of respect in communication.

Another aspect of work culture is *horenso*, which encompasses *hokoku* (reporting), *renraku* (informing), and *sodan* (consulting).

Hou-Ren-Sou, pronounced "horenso," is the Japanese work culture of communication and discussion. The *Horenso* principle encompasses three concepts: *houkoku*, which means reporting;

Renraku, which means informing; and *Soudan*, which means consultation or pre-consultation. All companies in Japan apply this work culture. *Horenso* culture is carried out so that communication and information can run smoothly and well (Morrow, Elkhaid, & Pringle, 2023) (Strotmann & Kunschak, 2022).

The role of Japanese culture in language learning is in accordance with one of the Indonesian government's curriculum programmes in the MBKM curriculum (Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka) (Putera & Sugianto, 2020). Japanese language learners have the opportunity to study 3 credits off-campus. This programme allows learners to have experience in practicing the knowledge gained for at least one semester (Agung S & Muh, 2019). As we know, education programmes in Indonesia can change according to the needs of society and the times. From year to year, it is characterized by changes in the curriculum, from primary education to higher education. The CBSA (How to Learn Active Students) curriculum existed during the 1980s to 1990s era. The KTSP curriculum (Education Unit Level Curriculum) was in the 2000 era. The 2013 curriculum was in the 2013 era, and the Merdeka Curriculum was in the 2020 era (Andini, Lubis, & Siregar, 2019) (Sumarni, Akhyar, Nizam, Widyastono, & Anggrainingsih, 2024).

Basically, the curriculum changes to meet the needs of students who are increasingly critical of the times and technological developments (Fitriani, Yani dan Azis, 2019). In practice, the independent curriculum in primary and secondary education differs from that in higher education. Primary education and secondary education are mostly learning in the form of discussions and presentations. Assessment is no longer in the form of numbers but uses descriptions (assessment of descriptions of the weaknesses and strengths of students (Tolosa, Navarro, & Egerton, 2023) (Roviana, Kistoro, Kodriati, Dahlan, & Long, 2025).

The independent curriculum of higher education is applied to activities outside the students' college. MBKM activities can take the form of internships at companies participating in the MSIB programme, teaching at schools through the campus teaching programme, and the Internship programme. MBKM programmes, namely MSIB and KM, are mostly implemented in Indonesia. The MBKM Internship programme is carried out in Japan for 6-12 months. This is carried out based on the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Implementation Agreement (IA) between UNNES (Universitas Negeri Semarang) as a university and companies that accept internship participants (Diner & Supriatnaningsih, 2025).

Based on a preliminary study of Japanese language education programme students at Semarang State University, the interest of Japanese language education study programme students in MBKM programmes is very high. However, among the three MBKM programmes, namely Teaching Campus, MSIB, and Internship, the highest is the MBKM Internship. This is because the Internship programme offers a hands-on experience in Japan, where interns can engage with and experience Japanese culture firsthand. However, some participants in the Internship programme fail to attend adequate lectures. Upon the return of students from the Internship programme in Japan, the courses taken can be recognised as many as 20 credits. The problem arises that students who participate in the internship

programme have not attended Japanese language lectures adequately. Some students joined the programme in the 4th semester.

Based on this situation, it is necessary to conduct comprehension analysis activities for students participating in the internship programme. The implementation of internships is carried out in the Japanese language education study programme at UNNES for 6-12 months. Therefore, there needs to be an effort to foster a good understanding of the culture of the internship programme.

In addition, low reading literacy can affect the level of language skills, specifically speaking skills, which in this case includes speaking anxiety. Thus, cultural and language knowledge can be said to affect the readiness of internship participants for cross-cultural communication. Speaking anxiety occurs as one of the causes, stemming from limited knowledge of culture and language. Based on this, the idea arose to implement a cross-cultural literacy media that allows learners to learn the Japanese language and culture as part of their internship readiness. A cross-cultural understanding of Japan and Indonesia is necessary to minimize misunderstandings in Japanese communication. This level of cross-cultural understanding can affect Japanese learners' speaking skills (Liu & Yeung, 2023; Trinh & Dinh, 2024).

The research to be conducted focuses on analysing the cultural understanding of internship programme students in the Japanese language education study programme at Semarang State University. This aligns with one of Semarang State University's research strategic plans, namely, realising quality and character education innovation, more specifically in the field of literacy, particularly in relation to digital media. In addition to literacy, cultural conservation is also an emphasis of this research.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach, which is commonly used to describe characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied systematically (Nasir, Nurjana, Shah, Sirodj, & Afgani, 2023) (Ali, Sastrodiharjo, & Saputra, 2022). This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach to examine the level of Japanese cultural understanding among students in the Japanese Language Education Program at Semarang State University who participated in the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) internship program in 2023 and 2024. The study aimed to provide a snapshot of students' cultural awareness after their internship experiences, particularly in relation to general culture, workplace culture, and communication culture in Japan.

2.2 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire developed based on key dimensions of intercultural competence, namely: general culture (daily life habits and customs), workplace culture (discipline, teamwork, and hierarchy), and communication culture (honorific language, *futsu-tai*, and *keigo*). These categories were aligned with the intercultural communication

theory by Dlaska (2020) and further adapted from Hamano et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of contextualized language use in Japanese business and social settings. Data were collected over a three-month period, from March to May 2024. The primary data collection techniques were questionnaires and documentation.

The questionnaire was designed to measure students' understanding of Japanese culture, focusing on aspects such as daily life practices, work environment behaviors, and communication norms (e.g., *keigo* usage). Questionnaires are considered effective tools for gathering diverse opinions and perspectives from a relatively large sample.

Documentation analysis was used to supplement the findings by examining students' cultural understanding as demonstrated in course records, especially in *choukai-kaiwa* (listening-speaking) lectures.

The participants were 25 students who had completed or were currently undertaking internships in Japan under the MBKM program. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, with the main criterion being prior or ongoing internship experience in Japan.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Students' responses were grouped into three categories: general culture, workplace culture, and communication culture. The percentage of correct or culturally appropriate responses in each category was calculated and presented using tables and charts. This analysis provided a clear overview of which cultural domains were well understood and which required further reinforcement in the academic setting.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. They were informed that participation was voluntary, data would remain confidential, and results would be used solely for academic and developmental purposes. Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

The results showed that respondents who participated in the MBKM internship programme demonstrated an understanding of Japanese culture, specifically general culture (96%), Japanese communication culture (76%), and work culture (64%). General culture is categorized as high because it is integrated into most skills and language courses. General culture is often observed in daily life, such as eating habits and customs related to entering and leaving the house. Meanwhile, work culture falls into the low category because it is integrated into a small number of courses and is acquired at an intermediate level, such as the *Bijinesu Nihongo* Course (6th semester).

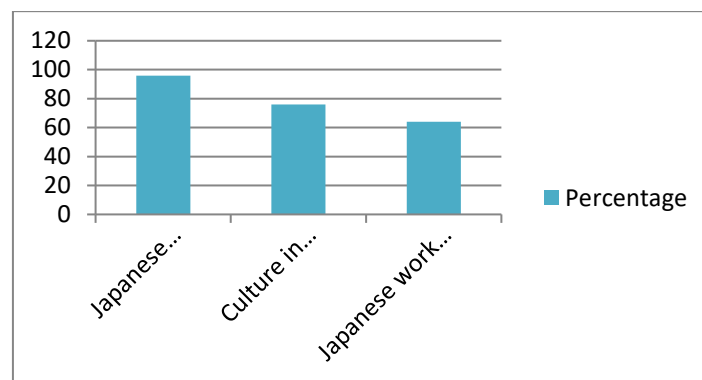
3.1 Overall Cultural Understanding

The results of the respondents' understanding of Japanese culture are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Cultural Knowledge Understood by Respondents Participating in the MBKM Internship Programme

Description	Percentage
Japanese general culture	96%
Culture in Japanese communication	76%
Japanese work culture	64%

Table 2 shows that out of 25 respondents, 96% have a high understanding of Japanese general culture. Meanwhile, of the three cultures understood, 64% of respondents understood Japanese work culture.



Picture 1. Cultural Knowledge Understood by Respondents Participating

The results revealed that respondents who participated in the MBKM internship program demonstrated varied levels of understanding of Japanese culture. As seen in Table 2 and Picture 1, the highest level of understanding was in general culture (96%), followed by communication culture (76%), and lastly work culture (64%). These findings suggest that general culture is more accessible due to its integration into daily life and across language skill courses, while work culture, often introduced in upper-level courses like *Bijinesu Nihongo*, remains less familiar to students.

The findings from Tables 3 to 10 indicate varied levels of students' cultural understanding, with the highest in general culture and the lowest in certain aspects of workplace and communicative culture. These results align with prior research (Hamano et al., 2023) (Syafryadin & Boulahnane, 2021), which found that students tend to acquire superficial cultural knowledge but lack a deeper understanding and practical application, particularly in professional contexts.

The discussion will provide a detailed explanation of the questionnaire results related to general culture, Japanese communication culture, and work culture.

3.2 Understanding of General Culture

Table 3 shows that eating culture (92%) and house entry/exit culture (88%) are the most widely understood, likely because these themes frequently appear in textbooks and are supported by authentic materials, such as dialogues and video content. However, the understanding of visiting Japanese homes is relatively low (56%), reflecting a lack of experiential learning in such contexts.

Similar findings were reported by Gile et al. (2023), who noted that culture taught only through texts tends to remain abstract unless reinforced by real-life interaction or simulation.

Table 3. Students' Understanding of General Culture

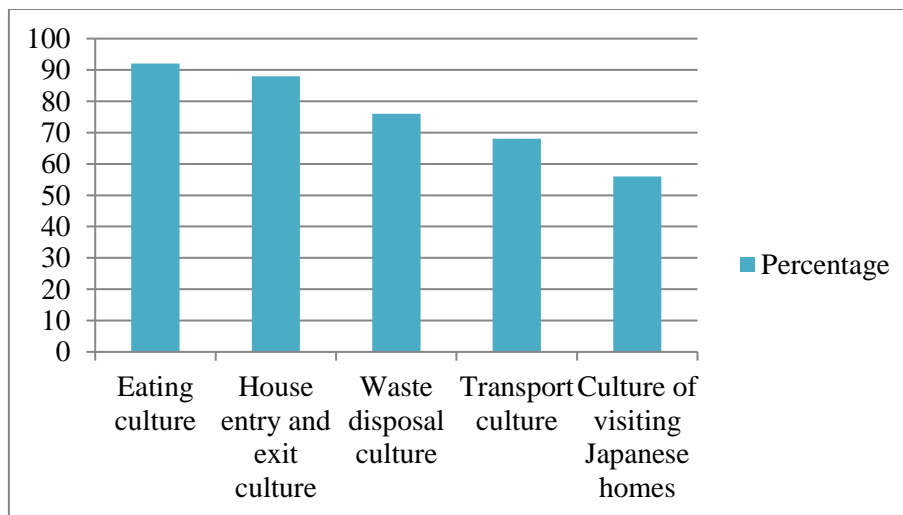
Description	Percentage
Eating culture	92%
House entry and exit culture	88%
Waste disposal culture	76%
Transport culture	68%
Culture of visiting Japanese homes	56%

Based on Table 3 above, it can be seen that the respondents in the high category, specifically those with a strong understanding of the culture of eating, have a 92% understanding. On the other hand, 56% of respondents reported understanding the culture of visiting Japanese homes. The culture of eating is at the top of the respondents' understanding because many language skills learning materials are related to eating and are close to everyday life. For example, sentence patterns using to iimasu and de particles.

The example below, which illustrates the culture of eating, is also found in other lessons.

日本人は端でうどんを食べます。
People eat udon using chopsticks.
食べる前にいただきますといいましょう。
Before eating, let's say itadakimasu (bon appetit).

Meanwhile, the culture of visiting Japanese people's homes is rarely practised by respondents. Respondents practised visiting Japanese homes in *chokai kaiwa* (listening-speaking) lectures.



Picture 2. Students' Understanding of General Culture

As illustrated in Table 3 and Picture 2, respondents demonstrated a high level of comprehension of general cultural elements. The highest was eating culture (92%), followed by house entry/exit

etiquette (88%), and waste disposal (76%). The lowest was visiting Japanese homes (56%). The strong understanding of eating culture is likely due to frequent exposure in class materials (e.g., sentence structures like “*itadakimasu*”) and its relevance in daily routines. Conversely, the practice of visiting Japanese homes is rare and typically only encountered in listening and speaking (*choukai-kaiwa*) sessions.

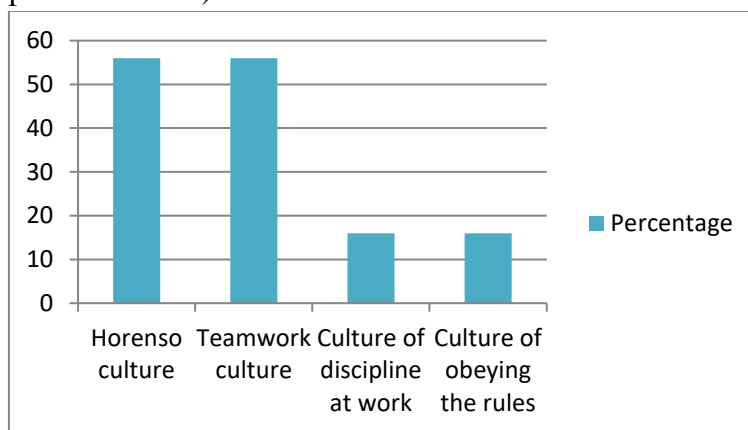
3.3 Understanding of Work Culture

As seen in Table 4, workplace discipline and rule compliance are understood by only 16% of respondents. While students may be familiar with basic concepts of Japanese business culture (e.g., *bijinesu nihongo*), they often lack concrete experience in real Japanese work environments. The concept of *horenso*—*hokoku* (reporting), *renraku* (informing), and *sodan* (consulting)—also revealed uneven comprehension. While 64% understood the need to report regularly (*hokoku*), only 4% recognized that reporting should also happen when not explicitly requested (Table 5), indicating confusion about autonomy and initiative in Japanese reporting culture.

Table 4. A Work Culture That Is Not Yet Understood

Description	Percentage
<i>Horenso</i> culture	56%
Teamwork culture	56%
Culture of discipline at work	16%
Culture of obeying the rules	16%

Based on Table 4, the work culture that has not been understood falls into the high category, specifically the *horenso* culture and teamwork culture, at 56%. This is because respondents have not yet mastered the work culture, and they are Japanese language learners who lack experience working with Japanese people, despite taking courses such as *bijinesu nihongo* (Japanese business) and *kankoyo nihongo* (Japanese tourism).



Picture 3. Work Culture That Is Not Yet Understood

Table 4 and Picture 3 reveal a significant gap in students’ understanding of Japanese work culture. While teamwork and *horenso* practices were moderately understood (56%), discipline and

rule compliance were particularly low (16%). This suggests that, despite some academic exposure, students lack real-world experience in Japanese workplaces, highlighting a critical gap in applied cultural competence.

3.4 Horenso Work Culture Analysis

3.4.1 Hokoku (Reporting)

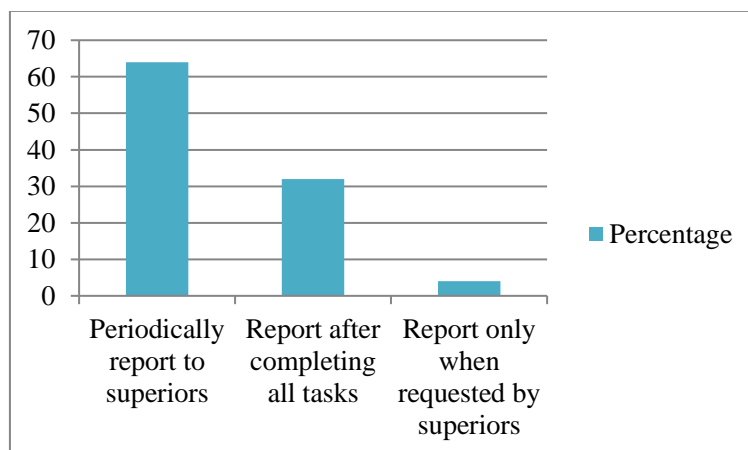
Table 5. Respondents' Understanding of the *Horenso (Hokoku)* Work Culture

Description	Percentage
Periodically report to superiors	64%
Report after completing all tasks	32%
Report only when requested by superiors	4%

The questionnaire statement "When I start working on the assignment, I will do.....". Based on Table 5. It is known that respondents have an understanding of the *horenso* culture in the *hokoku* work culture, specifically the practice of regularly reporting every work activity to superiors, as reported by 64%. While there are still 36% of respondents who do not understand the proper and correct *horenso* work culture on *hokoku* (reporting). Reporting work activities regularly is a Japanese culture that needs to be understood by internship students because Japanese culture, in terms of *hokoku* (reporting), is an awareness of a subordinate to a superior (Karapolat, Özşen, & Çetinkaya, 2023).

Regular reports must be submitted to ensure the work is completed properly. When getting assignments or work from seniors, employees should periodically inform their superiors or managers about the status of the work (Klara, Nagimzhanova, Aykenova, Zina, & Kanapñfanova, 2019).

How the work is done, whether there are difficulties, and any problems that arise must be reported to the supervisor and other colleagues who may be affected by the work. Additionally, when the work will be completed should also be communicated. If an error or problem occurs, it must be reported to the senior as soon as possible, as they will also be responsible. The existence of this business culture can also prevent mistakes in completing work (Treglia, 2023).



Picture 4. Respondents' Understanding of the *Horenso (Hokoku)* Work Culture

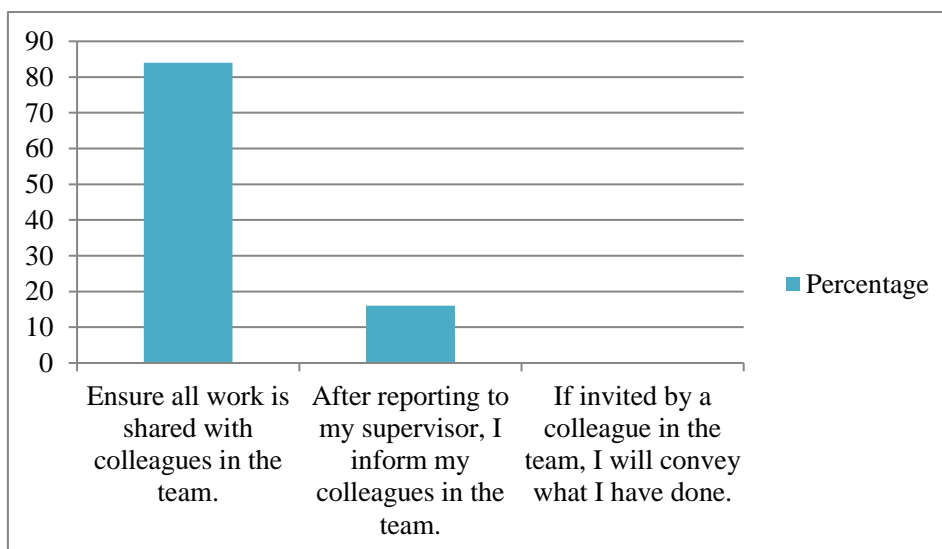
As shown in Table 5 and Picture 4, 64% of students reported that they consistently provide progress updates to superiors, a fundamental aspect of *hokoku*. However, 36% still lack understanding of this responsibility. In Japanese corporate culture, regular reporting reflects respect, accountability, and teamwork (Klara et al., 2019; Karapolat et al., 2023).

3.4.2 *Renraku (Informing)*

Table 6. Respondents' Understanding of *Horenso (Renraku)* Work Culture

Description	Percentage
Ensure all work is shared with colleagues in the team	84%
After reporting to my supervisor, I informed my colleagues in the team	16%
If invited by a colleague on the team, I will convey what I have done	0%

The questionnaire statement "When working on a task, I...", 84% of respondents answered that they ensure that all work is informed to colleagues in the team. This indicates that respondents' understanding of the *horenso* work culture, particularly in terms of informing (*renraku*), falls into the high category. Meanwhile, 16% of respondents do not understand the Japanese work culture of *horenso* in terms of *renraku*. *Renraku* involves communicating or sharing information with colleagues, regardless of their status or position within the company. The nature of *Renraku* is not as formal as the *hokoku* business culture. In other words, superiors, subordinates, and coworkers of equal status should communicate with each other if something happens. *Renraku* involves communicating or sharing information with colleagues, regardless of their status or position within the company. The nature of *Renraku* is less formal than the *Hokoku* business culture (Zuchdi & Nurhadi, 2019). In other words, superiors, subordinates, and Co-workers of equal status should contact each other if something happens.



Picture 5. Respondents' Understanding of *Horenso (Renraku)* Work Culture

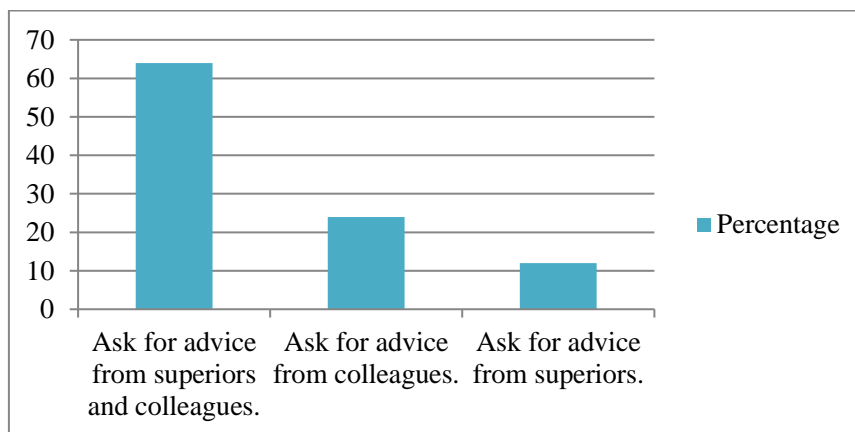
Table 6 and Picture 5 highlight that 84% of students proactively share work progress with team members. This high percentage reflects better comprehension of *Renraku*, the practice of keeping all stakeholders informed regardless of hierarchy.

3.4.3 Sodan (Consulting)

Table 7. Respondents' Understanding of the *Horensō* (Sodan) Work Culture

Description	Percentage
Ask for advice from superiors and colleagues	64%
Ask for advice from colleagues	24%
Ask for advice from superiors	12%

The questionnaire statement "In doing my tasks...". Respondents' understanding of the *Horensō* work culture at Sodan was 64%, with respondents seeking advice from superiors and colleagues when carrying out tasks or work. Meanwhile, 24% of respondents sought advice only from colleagues, and 12% sought advice only from superiors. It can be said that 36% of respondents do not have an understanding of the *Horensō* culture in Sodan. Japanese people will consult with seniors when they find it difficult to make decisions or when facing work problems. In Japan, this sodan culture is seen as a personal initiative to improve oneself (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Consultation can educate junior employees and foster deeper trust among colleagues. By seeking advice or opinions, we can also avoid spending more time making decisions or worrying about work problems. Therefore, the purpose of the Sodan culture is to ensure that all team members are not left behind and stay on track. Moreover, companies in Japan prioritize effective communication in their work. So, the existence of this Sodan culture is very important to be implemented in Japanese companies (Sweeny, 2021).



Picture 6. Respondents' Understanding of the *Horensō* (Sodan) Work Culture

As presented in Table 7 and Picture 7, 64% of students consult both superiors and colleagues, while the remaining 36% rely on only one of these groups. The Sodan approach encourages collaboration and strengthens internal trust within Japanese workplace culture (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

3.5 Understanding of Japanese Politeness Culture (*Keigo*)

Table 8 highlights a concerning finding: 48% of students rated their understanding of *sonkeigo* and *kenjogo* as poor. Despite being introduced in grammar courses and reinforced in speaking classes, *keigo* remains a challenging concept. This supports Takeuchi (2021) and Rohmadany et al. (2022), who emphasize that *keigo* requires contextual judgment and is often underpracticed due to limited real-life exposure. The classroom often provides structured *keigo* practice, but learners lack authentic, hierarchical social interactions to internalize when and how to use each form appropriately. This gap is not due to a lack of instruction, but rather a lack of context. As Sweeny (2021) notes, understanding Japanese politeness strategies requires immersion, not just memorization.

Table 8. Communication Culture Using *Sonkeigo* and *Kenjogo*, Respectful Language Varieties

Description	Excellent	Good	Not good
	Percentage		
Understanding of <i>sonkeigo</i> and <i>kenjogo</i> , respectful language varieties	0%	52%	48%

Based on Table 8. Respondents' understanding of the culture of communicating using respectful language varieties, namely *sonkeigo* and *kenjogo*, was categorized as follows: 52% in the good category, while 48% fell into the poor category. *Sonkeigo* and *kenjogo* language varieties are learned by respondents through sentence pattern lectures and applied in *chokai kaiwa* lectures. But the obstacles faced by respondents of this respectful language variety are rarely used by respondents as Japanese language learners in daily communication. The limited use of Japanese is also a contributing factor to the lack of understanding of respectful language varieties. This finding aligns with the results of research by Rohmadany et al., which indicate that learners' understanding of *keigo* falls into the low category or is lacking. There are still many learners who do not understand the function, meaning, and form of each *keigo*, resulting in many students making mistakes in their answers. Students' understanding of *keigo* is low (Rohmadany et al., 2022).

Table 9 shows that 80% of students are comfortable using *teineigo*, likely because it is reinforced as the default polite form in most classroom interactions and textbooks. However, the high comprehension of *futsutai* (96%, Table 10) can be attributed to media exposure such as anime, dramas, and social media. Oshima (2023) suggests that informal language forms are more easily absorbed through entertainment, which explains why students tend to have a stronger command of casual speech over formal variants, such as *sonkeigo*.

Table 9. The Culture of Communicating Using the Respectful Language Variety *Teineigo*

Description	Excellent	Good	Not good
	Percentage		
Understanding of	8%	72%	20%

teineigo, respectful language varieties

Based on Table 9. The culture of communicating using respectful language varieties was rated as excellent or good by 80% of respondents. *Teineigo* is one of the *keigo* in Japanese. *Teineigo* consists of 2 words, namely *teinei* (polite, courteous) and *go* (language, word, term). So, *teineigo* literally means polite language or words.

In accordance with the explanation above, *teineigo* is primarily used by speakers (in conversation) or writers (in writing) to convey a polite tone to the opposite party, whether it is the interlocutor, listener, or reader.

It can be said that *teineigo* is the easiest respectful language among the three main *keigo* (*sonkeigo*, *kenjougo*, and *teineigo*). As you can see from the example sentences above, *teineigo* is generally the most basic form of polite language in Japanese. Sentences ending in "*desu*" and "*masu*" that are commonly used as formal expressions are called *teineigo*, also called "*desu-masu-chou* (*desu-masu sound*)" (Obana & Haugh, 2021).

Table 10. The Culture of Communicating Using *Futsutai*

Description	Excellent	Good	Not good
	Percentage		
Understanding of using <i>futsutai</i>	20%	76%	4%

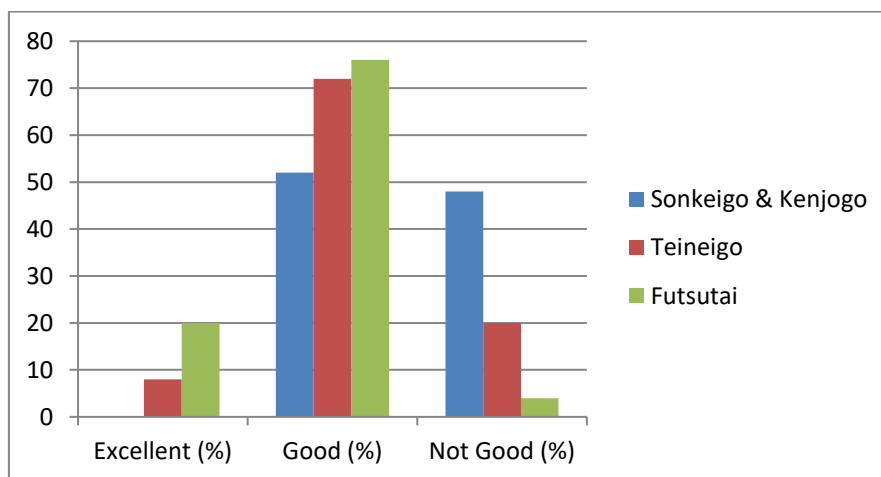
In Table 10, it can be seen that the respondents' communication culture in using *futsutai* falls into the excellent and good categories, with 96% of respondents. This is because the use of Japanese *futsutai* is often found in dramas, anime, or manga, and is also frequently shared on social media.

普通体 (*Futsuu-tai*) is the language used when speaking to people with whom the speaker has a close relationship, such as family, friends, familiar seniors, and acquaintances. Additionally, *Futsuu-tai* is used when writing diaries, novels, reports, and other similar texts. (Oshima, 2023).

Based on the analysis conducted, respondents have different levels of cultural understanding. General culture is the highest level of understanding because it is often practiced in daily life. At the same time, the understanding of *sonkeigo* and *kenjogo* communication culture is still relatively low among other cultures.

3.6 Comparative Analysis of Politeness Language Understanding

In addition to analyzing each language register separately, a comparative analysis was conducted to highlight the differences in student understanding of three key politeness language varieties in Japanese: *Sonkeigo* (respectful language), *Kenjōgo* (humble language), *Teineigo* (polite language), and *Futsutai* (plain/informal form). The results are presented in the Picture below:



Picture 7. Comparative Analysis of Politeness Language Understanding

Picture 7 demonstrates a clear gradient of understanding across different levels of speech formality in Japanese:

Futsutai (Plain Form)

Students demonstrated the highest level of understanding of *futsutai*, with a combined 96% in the "Excellent" and "Good" categories. This can be attributed to frequent exposure through anime, dramas, and manga, where informal speech is commonly used in everyday contexts.

Teineigo (Polite Form)

A total of 80% of students fell into the "Excellent" and "Good" categories for *teineigo*. As *teineigo* is taught from the early stages of Japanese learning and used extensively in classroom conversations, its comprehension is predictably strong. It is regarded as the foundation of Japanese formal speech.

Sonkeigo & Kenjōgo (Honorific and Humble Forms)

Only 52% of students achieved a "Good" level, with 48% falling into the "Not Good" category. No students reported "Excellent" proficiency. This reflects the complexity and contextual sensitivity of *keigo*, which is often regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of Japanese grammar. Limited use in daily communication and insufficient practice opportunities may contribute to this result.

This comparison suggests that the more formal and hierarchical a speech level is, the lower the student's mastery tends to be. This trend highlights the need for targeted instruction in *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*, potentially through scenario-based role-plays, internships, or business Japanese modules. It also reinforces the importance of building practical language use beyond the classroom to ensure balanced communicative competence across all speech levels.

These findings highlight a clear gap between classroom instruction and workplace readiness. While general and casual communication skills are well-developed, students are insufficiently prepared for formal or hierarchical communication in Japanese contexts. This necessitates a shift in curriculum design, moving beyond grammar-translation approaches toward task-based learning, intercultural role-plays, and industry-based internships or simulations. Incorporating modules that focus specifically on Japanese work etiquette, formal reporting lines, and consultation practices

would provide learners with more relevant, applicable cultural competence. Furthermore, collaboration with Japanese companies for virtual or short-term internships could provide students with a platform to practice *keigo*, *horenso*, and other business communication patterns in real-time. Teacher training is also needed to emphasize pragmatic instruction and provide feedback not only on accuracy, but also on appropriateness of language use in context.

The study revealed that while students show a strong grasp of general culture and basic polite communication, significant gaps remain in workplace culture and advanced honorific forms. The implication for Japanese language education is clear: there is a need for enhanced curriculum integration of real-life Japanese work and communication culture. This could involve simulations, case studies, and stronger connections with industry partners to prepare students for success in cross-cultural settings.

In summary, this study confirms that students' understanding of Japanese culture is strongest in daily-life contexts and weakest in formal workplace interactions and the use of advanced polite language. These findings reflect a typical pattern among Japanese learners outside of Japan and underscore the need for pedagogical reform. Future curriculum development must explicitly address the gap in professional cultural understanding through contextualized, experience-based instruction. This will not only enhance students' intercultural competence but also better prepare them for the sociocultural realities of internships and work in Japan.

3.7 Discussion

This study investigated the level of Japanese cultural understanding among students participating in the MBKM internship programme, focusing on three core domains: general culture, communication culture, and work culture. The results showed that while general culture is widely understood (96%), work culture remains the least comprehended (64%). Communication culture, particularly involving honorific forms (*keigo*), revealed varied levels of mastery, with informal speech (*futsūtai*) being better understood than formal variants such as *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*.

The high level of understanding in general culture, particularly in eating culture (92%) and house entry/exit culture (88%), aligns with previous studies that emphasize the importance of everyday life themes in Japanese language instruction (Gile et al., 2023). These topics are frequently embedded in textbook materials and reinforced through multimedia content, making them more accessible and memorable for learners. However, knowledge of less familiar contexts, such as visiting Japanese homes (56%), remains low, supporting Kramsch's (1993) argument that cultural competence requires more than linguistic exposure; it demands situational engagement and reflection.

Workplace culture, notably the *horensou* system, presented mixed results. While 64% of students reported understanding the need to regularly report to superiors (*hokoku*), only 4% understood the importance of reporting even without being asked—indicating a gap in understanding the proactive dimension of Japanese work norms. This finding is consistent with Karapolat et al. (2023) and Sweeny (2021), who highlight that Japanese corporate culture values initiative, transparency, and shared responsibility, features often underrepresented in conventional academic

modules.

In the communication domain, students exhibited high familiarity with *futsūtai* (96%) and *teineigo* (80%), likely due to extensive exposure through anime, dramas, and textbook dialogue. However, understanding of *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* remained low, with 48% rating their competence as “not good.” This trend aligns with findings from Rohmadany et al. (2022) and Takeuchi (2021), who argue that mastering *keigo* requires pragmatic competence and immersion, which is rarely achieved through classroom-only instruction.

While prior research has explored individual aspects of Japanese cultural understanding in foreign language education (e.g., Syafriyadin & Boulahnane, 2021; Hamano et al., 2023), this study provides a comprehensive and comparative analysis across three key cultural domains: general culture, communication culture, and work culture in the specific context of the MBKM internship program in Indonesia. The integration of a pragmatic-cultural framework, especially in dissecting *horensou* practices, offers a novel perspective on how Japanese work ethics are (mis)understood among student interns.

Moreover, the comparative analysis of speech registers (*sonkeigo*, *kenjōgo*, *teineigo*, *futsūtai*) offers empirical support for the hypothesis that students' mastery correlates with the degree of media exposure and instructional frequency. By combining quantitative and descriptive data, this study bridges the gap between cultural theory and applied language education, a field that remains underdeveloped in Southeast Asian contexts.

Importantly, this research also contributes by highlighting pedagogical blind spots in curriculum design, such as the lack of reinforcement for advanced cultural skills (e.g., consulting superiors, initiating reports) and limited contextualization of formal speech levels. These insights pave the way for a more integrative approach in curriculum development, blending cultural immersion, role-based simulation, and reflective practice.

The findings underscore the need to design learning experiences that extend beyond classroom instruction. For example, implementing scenario-based modules, shadowing tasks, or virtual internships with Japanese companies could strengthen understanding of nuanced workplace behaviors. Likewise, teaching *keigo* through real-life case studies and intercultural role-play can help students bridge the gap between theory and practice.

4. Conclusion

This study explored students' understanding of Japanese culture within the MBKM internship programme, focusing on general culture, communication culture, and work culture. General cultural understanding was the highest (96%), likely due to its frequent integration in daily life and classroom learning materials. Communication culture, particularly *teineigo* and *futsūtai*, was also well understood, with comprehension rates exceeding 80%, supported by exposure through media and formal education. In contrast, workplace culture and advanced forms of *keigo* (i.e., *sonkeigo* and

kenjōgo) posed the greatest challenges, with comprehension as low as 16% in some categories. These results suggest a substantial gap between students' academic exposure and their readiness for real-world professional communication in Japanese contexts.

The findings emphasize the need to go beyond foundational language skills by incorporating contextual, pragmatic, and experiential learning into Japanese language education. It is recommended that curricula integrate workplace simulations, cultural immersion modules, and explicit instruction on formal communication norms to strengthen students' cultural responsiveness and intercultural competence. This study provides a comprehensive perspective on cultural understanding within an internship-based program in Southeast Asia. It offers practical insights for developing more holistic and application-oriented language education frameworks.

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