

Intercultural Challenges: A Case Study of ESL Assistant Language Teachers in Japan

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ABSTRACT

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Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) often encounter challenges in negotiating institutional relationships during their internship, particularly in foreign language settings. Such negotiation process requires excellent intercultural skills of ALTs, especially those teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Despite this multifaceted nature of the internship requiring shifting between multiple roles as ALTs, little has been investigated about the interactional difficulties that could be obstacles for ESL ALTs due to the unfamiliarity with the new cultural setting. Hence, this study was conducted to identify the participants' interactional difficulties and cultural adjustments they make in their internship as part of professional growth through cultural reflections of experiences. This qualitative case study examines two Malaysian ESL ALTs operating in selected English language private centres based in Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan respectively. Findings indicate that the ALTs have fairly contributed to their development of intercultural competence and professional growth by addressing their interactional difficulties and cultural adjustments made throughout a course of 23 weeks teaching internship from reflections they have made. The study found that the ALTs face difficulties in building institutional relationships and also building interaction within classrooms. To manage these difficulties, the study found that ALTs have made some cultural adjustments, including adapting to cultural dynamics at work and immersing oneself in a new culture. However, limitations include the small sample size and the focus on two contexts, suggesting the need for further studies across diverse educational settings. The study concludes that building intercultural competence is essential for ALTs' professional growth and recommends incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches in future research, as well as longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of such programs on teacher development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an intercultural setting, both teachers and learners have the chance to learn from each other and gain insight into the diverse ideas and philosophies of different groups. The concept of 'borderless education' promotes this intercultural interaction by redefining teaching and learning dynamics, making education more accessible, and eliminating geographical barriers (Andrin et al., 2024). 'Borderless education' signifies the removal of boundaries, including those related to geography, time, disciplines, and concepts. This has enabled educational institutions to form partnerships with external entities (Kosmützky & Putty, 2015). Such partnerships encourage teacher collaboration, which is vital for enhancing workplace conditions, including cultural and political environments, thereby significantly contributing to student learning, teacher development, and overall school improvement (Jones & Smith, 2023). The international recognition that educational institutions gain through these partnerships significantly enhances intercultural competence. This, in turn, assists educators in creating culturally inclusive learning environments and fosters collaboration with other international institutions to integrate intercultural competence globally (Malik et al., 2024).

The importance of this study is highlighted by its focus on cultural competence, a critical aspect as the field of foreign language education strives to implement standards effectively. This study may support non-native language teachers in better preparing to integrate these standards into their teaching of cultural competence. It aims to benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including educational policymakers, institutions offering foreign language courses, educators, governmental bodies investigating the impact of teachers' intercultural competence, pre- and in-service teacher education programs, and learners of English. The findings provide valuable insights for all these groups. Additionally, the study's applicability to other language programs offers useful information for teaching intercultural skills in various cultural settings.

1.1 Statement of Problem

In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for English as a Second Language (ESL) Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) from diverse cultural backgrounds. While this trend promotes cross-cultural understanding, it also highlights challenges in negotiating institutional relationships among ESL ALTs. The arrival of ESL ALTs does not automatically result in intercultural contact, as they often face significant difficulties due to language barriers and cultural distance (God & Zhang, 2018). To navigate these challenges effectively, ALTs need cultural competence to understand and appreciate cultural differences.

Many studies focus on Assistant Language Teachers trained in developed, Western, or English-speaking countries. Although interest in practical issues related to teaching and transmitting culture has grown over the past few decades, there is a notable lack of research on the experiences of ESL Assistant Language Teachers trained in Asian contexts (such as Malaysia) or in environments where English functions as a second or foreign language. These teachers, who are sent abroad for teaching internships, play a crucial role in ensuring the transmission and appreciation of the target culture. Therefore, this paper aims to address this research gap by examining the experiences of ESL ALTs, who are also non-native English speakers, participating in a teacher education language program in Japan.

1.2 Objective of the Study and Research Questions

The case study seeks to examine the changing nature of the experiences of ESL Assistant Language Teachers who are graduates from a Malaysian public university, where they embarked on a language teacher education programme in Japan. This study was furthermore designed to identify the participants' interactional difficulties and cultural adjustments they make in their internship as part of professional growth through cultural reflections of experiences.

This research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What challenges did the ESL Assistant Language Teachers initially face in the internship of a language teacher education programme in Japan?
2. What cultural adjustments did the ESL Assistant Language Teachers make during the internship?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is crucial for fostering intercultural understanding (Castro et al., 2018), (Crushner, 2018). In educational research and education, it is often defined as the "ability to successfully and appropriately interact in an intercultural state or setting" (Perry & Southwell, 2011). Various approaches have been utilised to conceptualise intercultural competence (Bennett, 2021), (Byram, 2020), (Lustig & Koester, 2010), generally encompassing skills, attitudes, and knowledge. It involves critical understanding and abilities enabling individuals to navigate diverse cultural contexts successfully (Crushner, 2018). As culture is ever-changing, intercultural competence is continually evolving. The term "competencies" in its plural form highlights a dynamic approach, emphasising interaction with individuals who have diverse identities within specific contexts, rather than a static understanding of a "cultural other." This indicates that intercultural competence is variable and context-dependent, rather than universally consistent (Leal Filho et al., 2021). Hence, the process of developing intercultural competencies is ongoing, relative, and spontaneous (Dervin & Dervin, 2016).

An individual's level of intercultural competence, or their ability to reflect and act in culturally appropriate ways, is closely tied to their intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity is defined as "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (Hammer et al., 2003, as cited in Tarchi & Surian, 2022). Considering the points mentioned, it can be inferred that intercultural experiences significantly influence how individuals perceive and understand both other cultures and their own, ultimately achieving intercultural competence.

2.2 Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2009). This theory posits that intercultural capacity can be understood through three capabilities: the ability to critically evaluate oneself and one's traditions; the capacity for relationships, described as "living with and toward others" (Nussbaum, 2001); and the capacity to extend our narrative imagination to empathise with others' perspectives, thinking outside of our usual frameworks (Crosbie, 2014). Nussbaum emphasises the role of literature in fostering

empathetic intercultural perspectives. Developing an “empathetic imagination” enables us to perceive cultural others not as completely alien, but as individuals sharing different challenges and opportunities with us (Nussbaum, 1998). Engaging consistently and forming relationships with people from diverse backgrounds are among the ways to interact with various intercultural viewpoints (Hepple, 2014), (Tsai & Houghton, 2014).

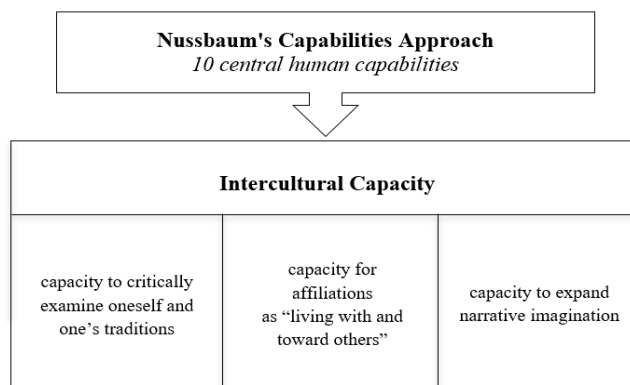


Figure 1: Nussbaum (2009) Capabilities Approach

Nussbaum’s framework offers a perspective on intercultural understanding through three interrelated primary attributes, as reflected in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Shan et al., 2016). The first attribute, national identity, promotes a strong sense of inclusiveness among students by encouraging them to understand and accept differences. This aligns with Nussbaum’s concept of critically examining oneself and one’s traditions. The second attribute, ethics and spirituality, which encompasses shared values among Malaysians, resonates with Nussbaum’s idea of engaging in relationships and “living with and toward others” (Nussbaum, 2001). The third attribute, thinking skills, aims to cultivate students’ abilities for inquiry and lifelong learning. This aligns with Nussbaum’s notion of descriptive imagination, which helps individuals “view the world from the perspective of other persons, particularly those whom their society might marginalise” (Nussbaum, 2010). These attributes support the application of Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach as a framework for understanding and evaluating intercultural competence in educational settings.

Furthermore, there is a notable connection between the development of intercultural competence and Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory, which is integral to the professional growth of student-teachers (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow’s theory is divided into two primary components: instrumental learning and communicative learning. Instrumental learning deals with task-oriented problem-solving and understanding cause-and-effect relationships, while communicative learning focuses on how individuals express their needs, feelings, and desires. Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory illustrates how new experiences and cultural reflections lead to personal growth and increased intercultural sensitivity. This theoretical framework supports the notion that reflecting on and challenging dominant stereotypes is crucial for fostering teachers’ intercultural competence, as explored in this study’s examination of cultural adjustments in the professional development of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs).

Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory plays a significant role in the development of intercultural competence, especially in the context of student-teachers’ professional growth (Mezirow, 2000). The theory’s two core aspects—instrumental learning, which addresses

practical problem-solving and evaluation of cause-and-effect scenarios, and communicative learning, which explores how individuals articulate their needs and feelings—are foundational to understanding intercultural experiences. Transformative Learning Theory provides a framework for analysing how new cultural experiences and reflections contribute to personal growth and intercultural sensitivity. This theory supports the study’s goal of understanding how the process of reflecting on and challenging prevailing stereotypes can advance teachers’ intercultural competence, particularly in examining the cultural adjustments experienced by ALTs.

2.3 Assistant Language Teacher Programme

The emergence of the ALT Programme began with Japan’s initiative to adhere towards the growing demand for English worldwide. The ALT Programme initially started with the purpose of building a bridge between Japan and other countries through mutual understanding. Thus, the programme is hoped to develop international exchange and simultaneously focusing on internationalisation among citizens and local communities in Japan. ALTs’ roles are therefore particularly vital in inculcating practical English communication skills as they are not just linguistic resources, but also cultural informants (Pearce, 2021). ALTs need to work together with host schools including preparing lesson materials, facilitating the students and assisting Japanese English teachers to boost their English competence.

The shifting roles of ALTs throughout the years have impacted not only the Japanese public but private institutions too. Much evidence has drawn upon the difficulties ALTs encounter when it comes to cooperating with Japanese English teachers in the classroom. Many ALTs expressed their difficulties particularly in team-teaching. ALTs are only perceived as “assistants” which downsize their roles to truly facilitate students’ learning of the English language. ALTs reported that there is a lack of a standard and understanding of what is expected in their roles (Castro et al., 2018). They also reported dissatisfaction on their roles as to constantly preparing and running games as well as being a human “tape recorder” (Tjipto, 2022). The study analyses the progress of ALTs’ cultural adjustments with a specific emphasis on building intercultural competence within teacher education and encountering multiplicities, particularly in negotiating institutional relationships.

2.4 Intercultural Challenges

Previous research has explored a range of issues associated with educational diversity in multi-ethnic and intercultural settings. The term ‘intercultural’ is used here not as a counterpoint to ‘multicultural’, as both terms are complex and often dichotomized in scholarly discussions. For example, the Malaysian government has committed to developing educational frameworks that foster human capital and support intercultural values. This commitment is reflected in the Ministry of Education’s goal to use education as a means of unifying a nation with diverse ethnic groups. In Malaysia, the concept of ‘tolerance’ has been central to promoting national unity within its socio-political context. The principle of “everybody matters” underscores the role of human rights in ensuring the dignity and survival of all individuals (Kirchschlaeger, 2020). Furthermore, this focus on unity is evident in educational policies from historical documents such as the 1956 Razak Report and the Rahman Talib Report, which have emphasised subjects like Moral Education and Civics to foster integration, tolerance, and intercultural understanding. These educational goals are designed to develop intercultural competence among students and teachers alike (Matveev & Milter, 2004). Despite these efforts,

there remain challenges related to teachers' abilities and preparedness to be interculturally competent.

2.5 Critical Reflections in Negotiating Institutional Relationships

In international practicum and professional development, critical reflections involve assessing, evaluating, and resolving issues encountered by pre-service teachers during their experiences (Miftah et al., 2023). These reflective practices are essential for teachers' growth and professional development. To be effective, this learning must be adapted to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of teaching methods to improve pedagogical skills.

However, not all ALTs can fully benefit from international teaching experiences due to various constraints such as financial limitations, time restrictions, and demanding course requirements. Additionally, there are instances where these international experiences do not meet their intended objectives and may even lead to adverse outcomes. For example, Dutch teachers in Indonesia encountered challenges related to students, school environments, and regulations, which hindered their performance during the international experience (Setyaningsih et al., 2023). Similarly, Southeast Asian student teachers faced issues such as communication barriers, culture shock, and insufficient preparation for cultural adjustment (Megawati et al., 2023). The diverse cultural backgrounds of ESL ALTs further complicate the process of negotiating institutional relationships, underscoring the importance of developing intercultural competence among these teachers, a point that will be explored in the following study.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was of a qualitative case study design, which aims to explore a single case which is specific, unique and within a bounded system (Stake, 1995). The case study approach is particularly useful in studying the interactional difficulties the ALTs faced, as it is able to delve deeply in the cultural adjustments they make throughout the internship. The participants of the study were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria aligned to the research objectives. Participants were deliberately chosen among ESL ALTs who are working in Japan, ensuring they have firsthand experience and can provide rich, detailed insights into the intercultural challenges faced in their roles. The target sample is two selected female Master of English Education as a Second Language students from University of Malaya. The two participants had completed their local teaching practicum during their bachelor degree in Teaching English as a Second Language and have never been to Japan. Thus, embarking the ALT journey in a foreign country will be a whole new cultural experience for them. Prior to confidentiality of the data, pseudonyms are used. Case 1, Siti, is based in Kyoto whereas Case 2, Amirah is based in Tokyo.

Different tools were used to collect rich data of participants' experiences in Japan. The tools include weekly reflective journal, monthly journal report, summary of interns' tasks and of e-mail communications over the course of 23 weeks of the internship. Two types of journaling format were used in this study. While the participants were in Japan, they wrote a reflective journal once per week. The format of the reflective journal involved open-ended questions concerning any cross-cultural misunderstanding in and outside of the classroom, their most rewarding experience of the week, challenging encounters, cultural adjustments, coping mechanisms and their professional growth. The monthly journal report follows a template of their daily life, school and work matters and welfare in Japan. Secondary data sources such as summary of ALTs' tasks were used to corroborate and complement the primary data sources.

Due to the emerging nature of qualitative studies, data sources are recognized continuously during the study and data collection methods are altered as required. The data sources and collection methodologies which is known as “the chain-source sampling approach” (Merriam, 1998) have been used to inform the data as it was obtained and analysed as well as to be sensitive to contextual aspects and adapt to conditions as they have happened over the course of the year to seek data that best shed light to research questions.

For this study, an inductive thematic analysis approach was utilised to uncover patterns and develop preliminary theories regarding the phenomena under investigation. Inductive analysis, (Patton, 2002), involves the identification of patterns, themes, and categories from the data itself rather than applying pre-established frameworks. This method allows for the discovery of insights through a process of data examination and interpretation, which is central to understanding the complexities of the research topic.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Research Question 1: What challenges did the ESL Assistant Language Teachers initially face in the internship of a language teacher education programme in Japan?

4.1.1 Building Institutional Relationships

Within Siti’s and Amirah’s first week, they were introduced to LEPTON with guidance of the company’s personnel. They seemed to be overwhelmed with LEPTON’s unique system and curriculum. This growing concern is subdued when Amirah felt rather relieved when she attended a briefing with Sana-san from the marketing and sales department to listen to the number of tasks she was expected to complete for the week. In an attempt to build institutional relationships, the ALTs would occasionally join lunch and meet ups held by the company to familiarise themselves with their colleagues. Such gatherings are indeed beneficial as bonds could be established in a more relaxed and friendly manner. Another example of the growing institutional relationships was a presentation Amirah did to members of the sales, public relation and marketing department. The 40-minute presentation including Q&A session at headquarters office allowed her to formally introduce her home country and cultural background. Her second presentation titled “English Education” covers English Education in Malaysia, differences of ESL and EFL education in Japan and her previous educational background.

On the other hand, Siti was invited to attend the Advanced series seminar where she first felt truly welcomed as a foreigner in understanding teachers’ roles and giving a clearer demonstration of how teachers should perform their “checking”. Both ALTs mentioned that they were not assigned to any specific mentor teacher. It is assumed, with their agreement, that the classroom manager or headmistress primarily carried out this role in supervising and delegating their tasks throughout the internship. Whether or not, the account of having one fixed mentor teacher assigned to the ALTs in giving actual feedback of their performance, is yet to be discovered during the initial phase of the internship. However, Siti was optimistic and acknowledged other teachers who worked with her in the classroom and believed, in the sense of reflecting her experiences, “it would be wise to consider other teachers as mentors too” (Siti, October MJR, 2018).

There were occasions when the ALTs did not specifically have anything to do as there were days where there were no tasks assigned to them. To avoid being judged as rather unproductive,

Amirah would just ask her classroom manager. Somehow by addressing their concerns instantly, it would ease their mind and reduce their anxiety while working. The trust between mentor teachers and ALTs began to establish when Nami san started letting Siti perform 'checking' two sections of students' work. This continual relationship was heightened when Siti was responsible to perform a full checking by the end of November. For Amirah, the starting point of growing an institutional relationship with her mentor was when she received new tasks such as posting updates of students at LEPTON's official Facebook page. This was further continued by another task of counting stock count of the "Day Check" worksheet and students' "Final Check". Everything was smooth sailing as both interns received fairly similar tasks until Siti had a hiccup with her classroom manager.

She was upset with the situation as she did not intend to cause a scene and wanted to confront her classroom manager about the incident. After sharing her concerns with Amirah and another personnel in Tokyo named Sana-san, Siti collected her courage and faced the issue head on. Siti took responsibility for the incident and Nami-san finally understood that it was unintentional. Although it seems small, Siti felt an obligation to apologise due to the treatment she received from Nami-san.

4.1.2 Interaction within Classroom

It is evident that there is a gap in language barrier which was a major hindrance towards engaging with students. The ALTs found it challenging in making meaning in the classroom. Acknowledging that the students only have a very basic grasp of the targeted language, Siti and Amirah would encounter situations whereby students misinterpret them. The ALTs perceived that without teachers' push to use the language, the students are mostly shy and reluctant to speak in English.

Kyoto centre hired a few foreign part-timers too. Siti had other native English teachers; Emily (American) and Emma (Scottish) who have worked over 5 months. The teachers share their struggle to do checking at first due to the language barrier. Now that both are taking up Japanese together in a nearby private school, they are progressing well in class. On the other hand, Esther (Hungarian) has lived in Japan for 4 years and talking to the Japanese is not much of a problem for her. Siti became insecure of her language Japanese skills and aimed to improve herself. Other interactional challenges include students' use of their mother tongue and thus neglecting the purpose of learning English. Over the course of the internship, students would misbehave when they could not attend to their learning. To overcome the language barrier, a positive learning environment needs to be established by teachers. Amirah eventually learnt the reason as to why Sayu-sensei liked to put on English songs during class.

On the contrary, Amirah also noticed that the students talk a lot, but in Japanese. Her classroom manager reminded them to not talk too much and focus on work instead and that they were only allowed to "talk too much" if they are using English. By the second month, students were beginning to show an improvement in terms of responding to the ALTs. This reflects that their presence in class does give an impact in making room for language opportunities. Trained as English as a second language in local universities, the ALTs face interactional difficulties when it comes to engaging with students and delivering meaningful lessons. They seemed to be caught up with the system that limits them to be creative in their teachings due to several internal constraints. Nevertheless, they were aware of the students' English language proficiency before coming to Japan.

The ALTs began to question the classroom's practices and learning culture which contradicts their local teaching experiences. They soon realised that they needed to act to the situation. The ALTs began contemplating their teachings and interpersonal skills. Addressing the issue, Siti and Amirah began working on their basic-classroom-Japanese in order to connect with students before pondering over the materials and methods needed for their teachings. Another contrasting foreign to local teaching experience was when Amirah drafted a presentation script about 'My Country' where she produced two versions of worksheets to cater to different levels of students. She revealed that the task was very difficult since she was used to drafting a more complex handout and worksheet for her students in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, from their observations, they noticed the students memorised a lot of English phrases. This habit seems to diminish the real aim of language learning, which is to create real-life communication between oneself and the interlocutor. The structured textbooks where students stay focused listening to audio recording while answering to questions, although may enhance independent learning, makes it harder for them to engage speaking verbally with the students. The ALTs wish to introduce a more communicative approach to the students in tackling this issue. Whenever necessary, the ALTs would listen to the audio tapes to accustom themselves with the textbooks, but both were not in favour of the learning style. In regulating their roles as ALTs, the teachers facilitate students' learning through correcting pronunciation of words, spelling errors and grammar.

Apart from their roles as ALTs, they were also involved in festivities and seasonal events which gave them the opportunity to connect with students. The second week in Japan happened to be Halloween. The ALTs already had their hands full with preparation of games, activities and class decoration to immerse with the festive vibe. Amirah was psyched with how the party turned out when students completely understood her instructions and questions. In addition, the success of the party went beyond Siti's expectation when Nami-san complimented her work.

In being interculturally sensitive occasions such as the students bringing candies to the class and shared with the ALTs depicts their level of toleration with their surroundings. Due to the fact that the students could not fully understand the concept of halal, the ALTs accepted anyways as to not offend them. The act was reciprocated when one of her student's parents who returned from Malaysia brought Malaysian biscuits and chocolates for her. The students were also aware of Siti's missing for 15 minutes during each first lesson because it was time for her Maghrib prayers. The cross-cultural differences were even more evident when Sana-san (Tokyo personnel) asked Amirah whether Siti is a stricter Muslim. Students were also particularly curious about the ALTs' nationality. The clash of culture triggered students' interest in them particularly in regards to their identity as Muslims. The ALTs took it as an opportunity by giving a good portrayal as Malaysians and Muslims.

In bridging the gap between Malaysian and Japanese cultures, the ALTs began introducing their Malaysian quiz to expose students with Malaysian culture. Although different classes in general react differently to their presentation, the ALTs were more than glad that students do respond by asking questions and giving attention. This motivated them to share more as the experience allows them to open up and make small conversations with students. Moreover, the foreign identity sparked students' curiosity and hence engaged them to speak up if they wanted to know more. Amirah soon realised that Japanese do not speak English with tone, emphasis, stress and rhythm and the learning of inflection and tone when learning a language is important too.

The ALTs' tasks shifted as Amirah then focused on Speaking Lessons while Siti continued with her weekly cultural quizzes. Both are on par with focusing on fluency rather than accuracy as they are more concerned on encouraging students to speak up and converse in English. As a whole, their identity as a foreigner projects international mindedness into the classroom, bringing in cultures from different countries and giving a more sense of geographical aspects into overall learning. Initially, the ALTs took their time to interact outside working hours. On weekdays, they were already drained from daily routines at the centre. Interaction beyond the workplace gradually occurs as they adapt to living in Japan. The interns mostly interact with their housemates. Amirah was flattered when her housemates made an effort to practise their English with her since they complemented her accurate and comprehensible choice of words.

4.2 Research Question 2: What cultural adjustments did the ESL Assistant Language Teachers make during the internship?

4.2.1 Adapting to Cultural Dynamics at Work

Amirah admitted she practised a lot of nodding and bowing to show respect to her high ups. To illustrate the cultural adjustments the ALTs made, the habit of simply nod and bow was picked up by Siti too particularly after a memorable incident at her workplace. Amirah also shared an experience when her office had a fire drill. She mentioned that everyone had to climb eight flights of stairs. It taught her to be ready for events like earthquakes where quick thinking is important to ensure safety precautions are taken. Another example was when they noticed that their colleagues would bring lunch boxes to work. They shared a common desire to do the same and started bringing their own lunch box too.

As part of being ALT, Siti was entrusted to be in charge of cleaning the classroom. She admitted by showing to the students her involvement in ensuring the cleanliness of the classroom, she could demonstrate and project positive behaviour to them. This is accompanied by *osouji* (the big year end cleaning ritual) where everyone in the company cleans the office together. These cultural adjustments taught the ALTs a sense of togetherness which is lacking in today's world. The Japanese celebrated *bonenkai* where the ALTs experienced having dinner with all kinds of alcoholic drinks. As for the ALTs, it was a test of faith and self-control whether they adjust themselves to the dynamics of their colleagues outside of the workplace. Moreover, *bonenkai* is particularly important as bosses congratulated their employees' work throughout the year and new staff casually introduced themselves again as a newcomer to the company. The ALTs acknowledged the challenge in drafting students' work as they were initially not used to preparing materials for very beginner students. One way or the other, they need to conform and figure out students' needs. In addition, the ALTs had to adjust to the Japanese marking style that differs significantly compared to the usual marking they did back in their home country.

Pertaining to the language barrier issue the ALTs initially had, they made the initiative to also equip themselves with the Japanese language towards a more effective teaching and learning. The ALTs indicated their satisfaction and that students' improvement in making use of English in the classroom is a rewarding experience. Students' willingness to participate and voluntarily did checking with the ALTs made them feel truly a part of LEPTON. These acts of acceptance enhance learning throughout the internship. The ALTs adjusted to their working culture in the sense of taking more proactive actions in dealing with any doubts at work. The institutional relationships they have created were then followed by many other occasions. Towards the end of the internship, both ALTs' classroom managers gave good rapport with students' initiative to speak more English in class. The ALTs in general, had their ups and down in understanding

the Japanese working culture. Although they were ready to immerse themselves with the distinctive working dynamics, unpredictable occurrences do happen in actual life.

4.2.2 Immersing Oneself in New Culture

Living in Kyoto, Siti felt lucky and grateful for the chance to fully immerse herself with traditional aspects of Japan. Her shared house is located strategically near local shrines and temples as well as popular tourist spots in Kyoto. Unlike Siti, Amirah had more obvious cross-cultural misunderstandings in Tokyo. She finds it hard to make eye contact and notices random pedestrians would just look away when she looks at them on the streets. She emphasised she did try to look and smile but to her disappointment, their eyes were always looking at some other ways. She later learnt and assumed such behaviour is a social norm whereby Japanese in general are shy in nature, but also agreed “this cannot be generalised, though” (Amirah, Week 1 WRJ, 2018). Siti, on the other hand, did not encounter such happenings as “perhaps the locals are used to seeing foreigners and tourists in the area” (Siti, October MJR, 2018). Siti experienced another new cultural difference during teaching on the Japanese reading culture. She was taken aback as her young student literally wanted a book for her birthday compared to receiving toys and such. Another example that illustrates the cultural adjustments is the Japanese culture of being completely quiet and silent.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings and Conclusion

5.1.1 Research Question 1: What challenges did the ESL Assistant Language Teachers initially face in the internship of a language teacher education programme in Japan?

ALTS’ Awareness of Aspects of Language and Language Teaching-Learning

The teaching internship has significantly enhanced ALTs’ awareness of various aspects of language and language teaching-learning, influenced by the culture and society of the host nation. This awareness is crucial as it boosts ALTs’ confidence, thinking skills, and shapes their attitudes and values. Sponseller (2016) found that ALTs generally understand and agree on how lesson planning works, including their involvement in creating lesson materials. Walter and Sponseller (2020) suggested that ALTs should be deeply involved in the teaching process, including lesson planning and course instruction. A participant in a study conducted by Walter and Sponseller (2020) commented, “I’d like the ALT to be the main and Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) to assist. It is good for the ALTs to largely take lead in the lesson and lesson planning and for the JTE to offer ideas, input and additional content.”

The ALTs’ language development and awareness are linked to their experiences during the teaching internship and the meaningful social and formal contexts provided in Tokyo and Kyoto private English language centres. These contexts involve the purposeful use of English for authentic communication in teaching and learning, as well as in interactions within local communities outside LEPTON. Although societal factors may not directly impact language learning, elements such as daily chores, engagements, interactions, and national events can have “strong and traceable indirect effects” on ALTs’ language development and learning. This aligns with Mezirow’s conceptualization of teachers’ transformative learning theory, as the two Malaysian ESL ALTs recognized their professional growth, increased language awareness, and confidence levels through changes in experiences and cultural reflection during and after the

language teacher education program. This suggests that meaningful professional development opportunities enable teachers to perceive and function as professionals who can continuously develop and grow.

Professional Development Experiences Through Process of Observational Learning

The findings indicate that two ESL ALTs have gained professional development experiences through observational learning in the Japanese private school environment. The mentor teachers and the established school systems serve as influential models for these pre-service teachers. This observational learning helps them internalise new knowledge by: (1) identifying meaningful experiences and discarding those that do not contribute to their development (Drage, 2010); (2) learning from various student interactions and contexts, particularly unfamiliar ones like the Japanese context (Kennedy, 1999); and (3) negotiating their experiences between Malaysia and Japan, adopting the best practices from both educational systems (Moin et al., 2011).

The ALTs practise vicarious reinforcement, carefully considering other factors before fully emulating or selectively adopting the models they observe. This has bolstered their confidence in their teaching skills, as they closely identify with the models, thereby enhancing their teaching efficacy. It is important to note that the pedagogical practices in Japanese private centres differ significantly from those in the Malaysian educational system, which is highly centralised and curriculum-focused. The ALTs, having no prior teaching experience outside the Malaysian system, found teaching in Japanese English language private centres to be a new and enlightening experience. Critical reflection on these practicum experiences helps to develop and enhance the pedagogical competence of pre-service teachers, preparing them for future teaching careers (Miftah et al., 2023). The mentorship and support from other teachers allow the ALTs to access various resources and pedagogical perspectives within this community of practice. Such engagements during their internship develop and enhance the ALTs' competencies through practical application, problem-solving, and creative decision-making (Farnsworth et al., 2016).

Thus, the ALTs' internship experiences in different educational environments with diverse students have been pivotal in developing their skills and confidence. They can interpret and create knowledge from their teaching experiences in both Malaysian and Japanese schools. Their exposure to different educational contexts has enriched their practice, helping them identify effective and successful educational methods. The ALTs view the international teaching internship as a powerful experience that has rejuvenated their passion for teaching and learning, in addition to building their skills and confidence.

5.1.2 Research Question 2: What cultural adjustments did the ESL Assistant Language Teachers make during the internship?

Developing Intercultural Skills

The findings show that the community of practice enables members to pursue knowledge through interaction. This engagement helps members (the ALTs) create, share, and evaluate tools, standards, and learning designs, deepening their knowledge and skills (Farnsworth et al., 2016). This borderless learning in Japan involves critically investigating oneself and one's traditions while associating with others (Nussbaum, 2010). Frequent interactions with teachers, staff, and students of diverse backgrounds have enriched the pre-service teachers' interpersonal

skills. The egalitarian relationships between the ALTs and the working community are marked by mutual respect, learning from each other, understanding cultural differences, and adapting to various educational perspectives and beliefs. These elements have contributed to the ALTs' personal and professional development.

New World Views of Education and Culture

Exposure to new worldviews, ideas, and educational perspectives has allowed the ALTs to discern different educational philosophies in Malaysia and Japan. Comparing these philosophies has enriched their knowledge and contributed to their growth as future English language teachers. However, at times, ALTs and JTEs faced communication challenges, affecting their working relationships (Walter & Sponseller, 2020). Despite this, the ALTs thrived on their experiences in different educational systems, becoming aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each and how they can influence respective educational settings. This experience has helped them become "cultural informants" (Pearce, 2021), well-prepared to acclimatise to local cultures, syllabi, and conditions quickly. The international teaching experience has reinforced the realisation that teaching methods are unique and embedded within the ideologies and philosophies of specific educational contexts. Consequently, the ALTs can connect their teaching concerns, students' learning experiences, and the overarching educational process in Japan through descriptive imagination.

Adapting to New Working Culture

Huang et al. (2020) mentioned that education reforms advocate for schools to create conditions that promote teaching and learning. The working culture in Japan has allowed the ALTs to focus on teaching and learning, contributing to their professional development. In contrast, Malaysian teachers often emphasise examinations within a rigid timeframe, neglecting their professional development due to the focus on students' summative performance. The working conditions in Japan have challenged the ALTs to improve as English language teachers without compromising their teaching philosophies and beliefs. The new working culture has driven them to adapt and strengthen their existing beliefs about teaching and learning. Critical reflection is crucial for teacher educators, emphasising the importance of continuous growth and professional development (Miftah et al., 2023 & Ventista et al., 2023). Leal Filho et al. (2021) further stated that teaching in Japanese private centres requires collaboration with teachers from diverse international backgrounds, enhancing intercultural competence. This genuine academic collaboration across borders contributes to the authentic learning and development of the ALTs (Vauras et al., 2019). Without teaching in Japan, the ALTs would not have experienced such international collaboration and authentic learning.

5.2 Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this study highlight that developing relationships with teachers and colleagues plays a vital role in the successful integration of ALTs into their communities and environments within language teacher education programs. Such interactions are crucial for ALTs' personal and professional growth, helping them overcome interactional challenges and gain insights into different working cultures. These findings offer a foundation for future program evaluations and contribute to documenting the significance of cultural competence in language education. They also provide guidance for improving the preparation of non-native language teachers, aiming to meet cultural competence standards. This study was intended to serve a broad audience, including educational policymakers, language education institutions, educators, and

governmental agencies involved in teacher intercultural competence. The insights gained from this research can benefit these stakeholders and may also offer useful information for similar programs in other languages that aim to develop intercultural skills in new cultural settings.

Future research should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively assess and document cultural teaching practices. Longitudinal studies are particularly valuable for tracking how non-native ALTs develop cultural competence from the beginning of their programs to their professional roles. Such studies could reveal changes in teaching practices related to cultural competence over time. Further research might include case studies that follow students through their teacher education programs and monitor their development in teaching elementary courses over extended periods. These studies could explore how ALTs' approaches to culturally oriented teaching evolve as they gain experience. Additionally, examining how cultural content in ALT programs influences teaching practices could offer new insights. Exploring how teachers' backgrounds and training affect their cultural knowledge transfer and classroom practices would also be valuable. Finally, a detailed content analysis of English language instruction in foreign settings could shed light on its effectiveness in developing cultural competence and its alignment with ALT program goals.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The study was carried out by SNYSS, NNEAR and SFMAB. All authors carried out the introduction and literature review sections. SNYSS collected and refined the data and performed the data analysis. SNYSS also wrote the data methodology section. SNYSS, NNEAR and SFMAB wrote the discussion and implication sections. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared

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