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Language Barriers and Cultural Adjustment Among Indonesian EFL Students During Housekeeping Internships in Taiwanese Hotels: A Case Study

[1]Marnawati, [2]Sri Rosmiana, [3]Ismail, [4]Umiyati Jabri, [5]Asbar

Universitas Muhammadiyah Enrekang, Indonesia
[1]itsmeemarnaaa@gmail.com, [2]srirosmiana@gmail.com,
[3]smileummaspul@gmail.com, [4]umiyatijabri@gmail.com, [5]asbarpairi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

International hospitality internships expose English as a foreign language (EFL) students to unfamiliar workplace languages and cultures, yet little is known about how Indonesian students experience them in Taiwanese hotels. This study aimed to describe the receptive and productive language barriers experienced by Indonesian EFL students during housekeeping internships in Taiwanese hotels and to explore how they experienced cultural adjustment. A qualitative case study was conducted with three English Education students who were purposively selected; each held a 12-month internship contract in a different hotel, in two cities. Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews in Indonesian and written follow-up responses, transcribed verbatim, and checked by the participants. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, informed by Richards' receptive and productive skills and Byram's intercultural communicative competence. Six themes were generated: receptive communication barriers; productive communication barriers; coping strategies and contextual support; noticing Taiwanese workplace norms; cultural adaptation and personal growth; and the interrelation of language and culture. Participants reported difficulty with accented speech, Mandarin-dominant workplace talk, and noisy or distant conditions, as well as unintended language choice and limited vocabulary for important messages. They coped mainly through gestures, clarification requests, translation applications, and learning Mandarin, and they perceived Taiwanese workplaces as disciplined and structured. Two participants attributed misunderstandings to both language and culture, whereas the third attributed them mainly to language. The study is limited by its three participants, online data collection, and accounts recalled at different stages of the placement (two participants had returned to Indonesia and one was still in Taiwan; interviews took place within two days). Pre-departure language preparation, supportive supervision, and future research with more participants and workplace observation are recommended.

Keywords: International Internship, Language Barriers, Cultural Adjustment, EFL Students, Hospitality, Taiwan

Corresponding Author: [1]Marnawati - [1]itsmeemarnaaa@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Internships are a widely used form of work-integrated learning that links classroom knowledge with workplace practice and is expected to develop graduates' employability skills (Jackson & Dean, 2023). From the perspective of experiential learning, an internship offers concrete experience from which students learn by doing, observing, and reflecting (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). When the internship takes place abroad, it also becomes an intercultural experience: international internships have evolved from simple work placements into learning

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environments in which students develop technical skills and intercultural understanding at the same time (Chen, 2025). International internships have also been associated with higher English test performance (Chang & Utsumi, 2024). For students of English education, a hotel internship in a non-Anglophone country can be an unusual language experience: they work where the local language is not English, yet English may still be expected to bridge communication with supervisors, colleagues, and guests.

In hospitality, language competence is closely tied to employability and career adaptability (Ren et al., 2023), and the perception of that competence is not always shared by students and employers. Chen et al. (2023) found a gap between students and industry practitioners in international hospitality internships: practitioners felt that interns needed to improve their language competency, whereas students perceived their competency as adequate. This gap suggests that what students experience at work may differ from what they expect before they go. It also raises a question that comparisons of perceived competence do not answer, namely how interns themselves describe the everyday exchanges where language competence is tested.

The role of language in adaptation abroad is well documented, although mostly in educational settings. A review of 313 articles on language and communication in international students' adaptation identified two main research streams, second-language proficiency and interactions in the host country, and called for more research on students in non-Anglophone countries (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Taiwan is such a setting. Hastowohadi (2026) reported that some of six Indonesian students at a Taiwanese university struggled with limited Mandarin and with some lecturers' accented English, that some used translation aids such as Google Translate and, in one case, body language, and that some were surprised by strict regulations and discipline. European students' adaptation to socio-cultural interactions in Taiwan has also been studied, including acculturative stress, language issues, and contact with local residents (Hsu et al., 2021). Similarly, Ramadhani & Poedjiastutie (2020) studied eight English department students from an Indonesian university who joined an international internship in Thailand. They reported problems related to language, English knowledge, and the use of Thai script, together with differences in academic culture such as the relationship between students and teachers and school culture. Chen (2025) reported that language and culture were among the most intensely discussed themes in Taiwanese design students' internship reflections in Japan. These studies indicate that language and culture matter in internships abroad, but most of them concern classrooms or campuses rather than the workplace. Workplace-based studies are fewer and narrower in scope. Lin & Tseng (2020) analyzed the reflective journal entries of six Taiwanese college students on overseas tourism and hospitality internships, Dyita et al. (2026) retrospectively compared 40 Indonesian interns' self-perceived English communication skills before and after an internship in Taiwan, and Ardiansyah et al. (2026) examined the motivation and communication strategies of five Indonesian interns in Taiwan.

Workplaces add pressures that classrooms do not: tasks are often time-bound, instructions are brief, and mistakes can affect colleagues and guests. In the housekeeping work studied here, communication takes place in brief, task-oriented exchanges while people are working, often while moving between rooms or using equipment. In such settings, English is frequently used as a lingua franca among speakers who do not share a first language, and

successful communication depends on mutual accommodation and negotiation of meaning rather than on native-like accuracy (Firth, 1996; Jenkins, 2006), including in hospitality service encounters (Thongphut & Kaur, 2023). Listening is affected by speakers' accent and by listeners' language experience and background (Munro & Derwing, 2020; Saito et al., 2019), and speakers with limited vocabulary rely on communication strategies such as gestures, appeals for help, and simplification (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Tarone, 1980), as Thai hotel interns also do (Noobutra, 2026). Non-verbal communication has also been examined in hospitality interns' service encounters (Malate et al., 2023).

Cultural adjustment adds a second layer. Early work described culture shock as a reaction to the loss of familiar cues and to the strain of constant adjustment (Oberg, 1960). Later research distinguished psychological adjustment, concerning emotional well-being, from sociocultural adaptation, concerning the ability to manage everyday interaction in the new setting (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1999; Lai et al., 2023). Sojourners may also follow different acculturation strategies (Berry, 2005). In the field of intercultural communication, scholars have proposed that competence involves attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), that people move through increasingly flexible orientations toward difference (Hammer et al., 2003), and that cultural intelligence supports intercultural adjustment (Chu & Zhu, 2023; Wawrosz & Jurášek, 2023).

These observations point to a problem that is both practical and conceptual. Practically, universities that send English education students abroad, and hotels that host them, need to know where communication actually breaks down and how interns cope, so that preparation and supervision can be improved; the perception gap reported by Chen et al. (2023) suggests that assumptions about language readiness may be inaccurate. Conceptually, studies of language barriers and studies of cultural adjustment have largely developed in parallel, even though in daily work the two are experienced together: a misheard instruction may be read as a language problem, whereas a loudly spoken sentence may be read as a cultural one. A study that examines both within the same workplace accounts can therefore contribute to understanding how they interact.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, few qualitative studies have examined both the language barriers and the cultural adjustment of Indonesian EFL students during housekeeping internships in Taiwanese hotels. Existing studies tend to focus on campus adaptation, on other internship fields, or on perceptions of language competency, and they often treat language and culture separately. The contribution of this study lies in bringing Richards' (2008) receptive and productive skills and Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence together in one case with three embedded units (hotel placements), using the participants' own accounts of everyday housekeeping work. Closely related studies have examined Indonesian interns' self-perceived English communication skills (Dyita et al., 2026) and their motivation and communication strategies (Ardiansyah et al., 2026) in Taiwan. The present study complements them by focusing on housekeeping work and by examining receptive and productive language barriers together with cultural adjustment.

Two theoretical lenses guide the study. First, Richards (2008) treats listening and speaking as distinct skills; in this study, listening represents receptive demands and speaking represents productive demands. Second, Byram (1997) describes intercultural communicative competence through five components (*savoirs*): attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*),

skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). Because Mandarin, rather than English, was the dominant workplace language for the participants, the study also considers what a multilingual workplace adds to the application of Richards' framework, in line with the view that second-language users are not deficient monolinguals but speakers who draw on several languages together (Cook, 1992; Grosjean, 1989). The study therefore pursued two objectives: (1) to identify and describe the receptive and productive language barriers experienced by Indonesian EFL students during housekeeping internships in Taiwanese hotels, and (2) to explore how they experienced cultural adjustment during these internships.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998) with a single case and three embedded units. A case study is suited to a detailed, context-bound description of a phenomenon in its real setting (Yazan, 2015). The case was bounded as the internship arrangement of one English Education program, which placed students in Taiwanese hotels on 12-month housekeeping contracts through a partnership with a placement agency. No language preparation was provided before departure. The three participants worked in three different hotels in two cities (two participants in one city and one in another). Within this single case, each participant's placement was treated as an embedded unit: patterns were examined across the three units, while conditions specific to one hotel or one participant are reported as such.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020). The criteria were: (a) being a student of English Education, (b) having undertaken a housekeeping internship in a Taiwanese hotel with a 12-month contract, and (c) willingness to share their experience. Twelve students from the program undertook internships in Taiwan. Two worked in restaurants and were not eligible, leaving ten who worked in hotel housekeeping, including the researcher. The researcher contacted the other nine through direct messages on WhatsApp. Three took part; two declined; two agreed but could not complete an interview (one repeatedly postponed it, and the other could not be interviewed because of conditions at their workplace) and were replaced; and two were not included for personal reasons relating to the interview situation. The three participants are identified as R1, R2, and R3 to protect their identities; hotels and cities are not named. The number of Indonesian interns in each hotel differed (four, three, and two, according to R1, R2, and R3). Table 1 summarizes the participants.

Table 1 Profile of the Participants

Participant	Placement	Contract	Placement began	Status when data were collected	Interview
R1	Housekeeping (occasional canteen duty)	12 months	Late September 2025	Returned to Indonesia about three weeks earlier, after 12 months	± 24 min
R2	Housekeeping	12 months	Early to mid October 2025	Returned to Indonesia about two weeks earlier, after 12 months	± 19 min
R3	Housekeeping	12 months + 3-month extension	Early to mid October 2025	Still in Taiwan, in the 3-month extension after about 12 months	± 17 min

Note. All participants were English Education students. Placement start dates are given in broad terms to protect anonymity. The three participants were working abroad for the first time. Their English proficiency ranged from basic to fairly good, and some had begun to learn Mandarin before departure.

Data Collection

Data came from online semi-structured interviews and written follow-up responses. The interview guide consisted of 19 questions adapted from Richards' (2008) receptive and productive skills and Byram's (1997) components of intercultural communicative competence. After two warm-up questions, the guide covered receptive barriers (Q3–5), productive barriers (Q6–9), noticing and interpreting workplace culture (Q10–13), attitudes and adaptation (Q14–16), and reflection (Q17–19). For the first objective, representative questions were "Can you describe a situation early in your internship when you had difficulty understanding an instruction given in English?" (Q3, drawing on Richards' treatment of listening) and "Can you recall a moment when you knew what you wanted to say but struggled to say it in English?" (Q7, drawing on Richards' treatment of speaking). For the second objective, they were "What differences have you noticed between Taiwanese workplace culture and what you were used to in Indonesia?" (Q10, Byram's savoirs) and "How do you usually respond or adjust when you encounter these cultural differences?" (Q15, savoir apprendre/faire). Q3, Q7, and Q11 asked for a specific incident, but they were worded around difficulty and not as neutral requests. Experiences beyond the framework could be raised through Q9, which asked about Mandarin in the workplace, Q10, which did not name a particular norm, and Q19, which invited anything not yet discussed; the written follow-up questions then asked for clarification and concrete examples. Interviews were conducted via Zoom on 21 October 2026 (R1 and R3) and 23 October 2026 (R2), in Indonesian, the participants' and the researcher's shared language, and were video-recorded. The recordings lasted approximately 24 minutes (R1), 19 minutes (R2), and 17 minutes (R3). After the interviews, participants answered follow-up questions in writing through WhatsApp on 29 October 2026 to clarify unclear statements and to give concrete examples: 10 responses from R1, 14 from R2, and 11 from R3. The follow-up questions were prepared after the interviews had been transcribed and read. Where an interview answer was incomplete or had not fully addressed the question, the researcher asked a similar question again in writing, sometimes with different wording but the same intent. Written responses were read together with the interview transcripts, and every excerpt quoted

in this article is labeled as coming from either the interview or a written response. For example, R1 said that none of the hotel workers was fluent, whereas a written response described supervisors as ranging from no English to fluent; the finding is therefore reported as varied English proficiency among host colleagues and not as uniformly limited English. Because the recording of R3 stopped unexpectedly just after question 18 was asked (the storage of the researcher's device was full), R3 answered questions 17 to 19 in writing through chat; question 17 was asked again in writing because R3's spoken answer did not fully address it. One of R3's written responses, the account of the lunch-break misunderstanding (Theme 1), was replaced by an account that R3 retold in their own words on 2 November 2026. The original response was replaced because it was not clear enough. R3 confirmed the retold account on the same date, and only the retold account is reported here. Dialogue within it is remembered speech, not wording recorded at the time.

No workplace observation was conducted because all interviews were held online, and the analysis therefore relied on the interview transcripts and the written follow-up responses. Interviews were transcribed with the assistance of Notta, an AI transcription tool. The researcher checked each transcript against the video recording, corrected errors, and anonymized the data. Regional particles and mixed-language expressions were retained, and only typographical errors were corrected. Each participant received their own transcript and written responses, and confirmed their accuracy; the few clarifications and additions that participants suggested were incorporated into the final transcripts. All three participants confirmed the final transcripts and written responses on 1 November 2026.

Excerpts reported in this article were translated from Indonesian into English by the researcher with the help of an AI tool (see AI Acknowledgment). Words in other languages are kept as spoken: *jie-jie* (older sister, used for female co-workers) and *juren* (*zhǔrèn*, supervisor or head of section, as glossed by R1) are Mandarin terms, and R3 used "*bahasa Taiwan*" to refer to Mandarin (R3, written response), which is written here as Mandarin. Bracketed text gives clarification. For expressions whose interpretation matters to the findings, including regional particles, R1's reluctance to joke, and R1's advice about preserving identity, the researcher compared the AI-assisted translation with the interview recording, and rechecked and corrected the wording. For example, R1's *"Harusnya bawa koh identitasmu juga, jangan terlalu mengalah begitu"* was translated as "We should have brought our identity too and not held back so much"; here *"mengalah"* refers to holding back one's own identity rather than giving in, *"identitasmu"* (your identity) is generic address rendered "our" because R1 included the interns, R1 among them, and the regional particle *"koh"* was left untranslated. Similarly, *"segan"* in *"segan ka mau bercanda-bercanda"* was rendered "reluctant." The Indonesian originals, which contain regional particles from South Sulawesi, are retained in the audit trail.

Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

The data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. In the first phase, the researcher read the transcripts and written responses repeatedly. In the second phase, meaningful segments were given short descriptive codes. The codes were reviewed and consolidated into a final codebook of 31 codes. Each code was defined and linked to verbatim evidence in a coding table that records the participant, the source (interview timestamp or written response), and the role of each excerpt (main when it directly supports

the code, supporting when it adds detail, and comparison when it differs from the code and is not counted as support), so that every theme can be traced to its source. Selected codes were defined with inclusion boundaries. Unclear directives covered instructions given in Mandarin, mixed language, or gesture alone after which the intern was unsure what was meant; misunderstandings caused by noise or distance were coded as situational factors instead. Cross-linguistic interference covered language produced unintentionally while speaking, such as English coming out where Mandarin was intended; lacking the words for a message was coded separately as lexical gaps. Behavioral adjustment covered changing one's own behavior to follow local workplace norms. As a worked record, R1's written response, in which a colleague "only gave a gesture as direction" and used "ambiguous English" so that R1 fetched toilet tissue instead of a fan, was coded as "Mandarin-dominant interaction and unclear directives" and placed under Theme 1 (Receptive communication barriers). The codebook and coding table served to document traceability and not to establish inter-coder agreement, in line with reflexive approaches to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A first draft of the initial codes was prepared from the anonymized transcripts with the assistance of a generative AI tool, following recent guidance on using generative AI in thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2025). The researcher then reviewed the draft against the transcripts and determined the final codes and themes. For example, in the preliminary draft, accounts of language and culture being linked were a subtheme within the theme on workplace culture. In the final themes, the researcher treated them as a separate theme (Theme 6), because they bear on both research objectives. In the third phase, the codes were grouped into six themes aligned with the two objectives, using Richards' (2008) distinction between receptive and productive skills and Byram's (1997) components as sensitizing frameworks while remaining open to codes that did not fit them. Subthemes were created where a theme combined codes that answered different aspects of its question, not to reflect the number of codes. Themes 1, 2, and 6 each had a single organizing idea (what interns found hard to understand, what they found hard to say, and how language and culture were experienced together) and were not divided. In Theme 3, the subthemes separate how interns handled a breakdown in the moment (interactional and non-linguistic strategies), how they adjusted or built their own language resources (linguistic strategies and learning), and what the workplace provided or did not provide (orientation and workplace support). In Theme 4, they separate norms about how work is organized, valued, and compared with Indonesian practice (work organization and time discipline) from norms about how people communicate across rank (interpersonal communication and hierarchy). In Theme 5, they follow participants' accounts from first reactions and how these eased (initial responses), through what they did (behavioral adaptation), to what remained afterward (outcomes and critical reflection). For the first objective, the Theme 3 subthemes show that coping involved both the interns' own actions and the workplace context. For the second, the Theme 4 and 5 subthemes distinguish what participants noticed in the workplace from how they adjusted to it. In the fourth phase, each theme was reviewed for support from more than one participant. This rule was applied to themes, not to individual codes: every theme includes at least one code supported by two or more participants (Table 2), while codes supported by only one participant were retained within the theme and reported as individual experiences (for example, cross-linguistic interference for R1 and gentle and supportive correction for R2). Such experiences were not used to build a shared theme on their own, but divergent accounts

could change how a shared theme was written. For example, R1's differing statements about supervisors' English led the finding to be reported as varied English proficiency among colleagues, not as uniformly limited English, and R3's attribution of misunderstandings mainly to language was kept as a divergent case within Theme 6 instead of being absorbed into the view that both language and culture were responsible. An experience reported by one participant could also qualify a shared theme: R1's critical reflection on keeping one's identity (Theme 5) qualified the otherwise positive account of adaptation, and R1's unintended language switching was kept as a distinct barrier within Theme 2. Excerpts that differed from a code were marked as comparison and were not counted as support, so Table 2 shows where support was found, while the text reports where accounts diverged. In the fifth phase, the themes were named and defined, and in the sixth phase they were written up with representative excerpts. Findings are presented as the participants' own accounts and are not generalized beyond these three participants.

Trustworthiness followed Lincoln & Guba (1985) and current guidance on rigor in qualitative research (Johnson et al., 2020). Credibility was supported by verbatim transcription and by participants' checking of their transcripts and written responses, which was treated as a way of inviting participants' responses and not as proof of validity (Motulsky, 2021; Vella, 2024). Evidence on pay and on comparisons between workplaces is reported with caution, because it came in response to questions that invited comparison. Transferability was supported by describing participants and context in detail. Dependability and confirmability were supported by the coding table as an audit trail and by presenting participants' own words. In line with a reflexive approach, the researcher's position is acknowledged: some participants were the researcher's classmates and others were junior students in the same English Education program. This familiarity and the shared language may have helped participants speak openly, but they may also have shaped how participants responded and how their accounts were interpreted. The researcher had also completed a housekeeping internship, and the questions asking for a specific incident (Q3, Q7, and Q11) were worded around difficulty, which may have invited accounts of difficulty more than accounts of ease. Before the interviews, the researcher expected that English would be the main difficulty for the interns; after reading the accounts, particularly those of Mandarin-dominant talk, accent, and noisy conditions, the researcher gave these more attention in coding. In interpreting the accounts, differing views were not smoothed into a single statement. R1 said that none of the hotel workers was fluent, but a later written response described supervisors as ranging from no English to fluent, and R1 also described interns' and superiors' English as "balanced". The finding was therefore reported as varied English proficiency, and the "balanced" account was kept as a comparison excerpt. Positive accounts, such as those of supportive colleagues, were reported with the same source labels as other excerpts and alongside the absence of language support in orientation, so that readers can see where each account came from. Because the researcher shared the program and the internship experience with participants, agreement and positive accounts could be accepted too easily. To limit this, excerpts that differed from a code were marked as comparison and not counted as support, and divergent accounts were kept, such as R1's statement that interns' and superiors' English was "balanced" and R3's view that misunderstandings were mainly linguistic.

Participation was voluntary. All three participants signed a written informed consent

form before data collection, were informed that they could withdraw at any time, and are anonymized throughout.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated six themes (Table 2). Themes 1 to 3 mainly address the first objective, on receptive and productive language barriers and how participants dealt with them. Themes 4 and 5 address the second objective, on cultural adjustment. Theme 6 cuts across both objectives by showing how language and culture were experienced together. All findings are the participants' reports and perceptions. Codes supported by only one participant are reported as individual experiences and are marked as such, and excerpts are labeled with the participant code and the type of source (interview or written response). Check marks in Table 2 show where support was found, and blank cells should not be read as the absence of an experience.

Table 2 Themes, Subthemes, Codes, and Participants Contributing Evidence

Subtheme	Code	R1	R2	R3
Theme 1. Receptive communication barriers				
	Accent and speech rate	✓	✓	✓
	Mandarin-dominant interaction and unclear directives	✓	✓	✓
	Varied English proficiency among host colleagues	✓		✓
	Situational and early-stage factors	✓	✓	✓
Theme 2. Productive communication barriers				
	Cross-linguistic interference	✓		
	Lexical gaps and difficulty formulating messages	✓	✓	✓
	Hesitation, processing time, and fear of mistakes		✓	✓
Theme 3. Coping strategies and contextual support				
Interactional and non-linguistic strategies	Gestures and body language	✓	✓	✓
	Requesting clarification and assistance	✓	✓	✓
	Translation applications	✓	✓	✓
Linguistic strategies and learning	Simplifying and mixing languages	✓	✓	✓
	Learning Mandarin and vocabulary	✓	✓	✓
Orientation and workplace support	Orientation without language support	✓	✓	✓
	Supportive host colleagues	✓	✓	✓
Theme 4. Noticing Taiwanese workplace norms				
Work organization and time discipline	Punctuality and time discipline	✓	✓	✓
	Structured, results-oriented work		✓	✓
	Perceived pay differences and recognition		✓	✓
	Perceived contrast with Indonesian norms	✓		✓
Interpersonal communication and hierarchy	Professionalism and low visibility of hierarchy	✓		
	Direct, concise, and formal communication	✓		✓
	Gentle and supportive correction		✓	

Subtheme	Code	R1	R2	R3
Theme 5. Cultural adaptation and personal growth				
Initial responses	Nervousness, culture shock, and social distance	✓	✓	✓
	Disconfirmed expectations and growing comfort	✓	✓	✓
Behavioral adaptation	Behavioral and emotional adjustment	✓	✓	✓
	Observation, politeness, and greetings		✓	
Outcomes and critical reflection	Increased confidence and internalized norms	✓	✓	✓
	Reconceptualized views of communication		✓	
	Critical reflection and advice	✓		
Theme 6. The interrelation of language and culture				
	Perceived causes of misunderstanding	✓	✓	✓
	Cultural differences surfacing in communication behavior	✓		✓
	Language learning as a route to cultural understanding		✓	✓

Note. A check mark means that the participant's interview or written responses contained at least one excerpt coded as main or supporting evidence for the code. A blank cell means that no such excerpt was identified in that participant's data. It does not mean that the experience did not occur: the participant may not have raised it, or the relevant excerpt may have been a comparison excerpt, which is not counted as support. For example, R1's statement that R1 answered directly "without translating it first" was treated as a comparison excerpt for the hesitation code and not counted as support. Codes with a single check mark are reported in the text as individual experiences.

Theme 1. Receptive Communication Barriers

All three participants reported difficulty understanding what host colleagues said, and they located the difficulty largely in accent and speech rather than only in a lack of English. R1 said, "Actually, their English is good, but it is the accent," and added that such speech "has to be digested carefully before I understand what they are saying" (R1, interview and written response). R2 explained that the difficulty came "because they speak too fast and their accent is partly a Chinese accent, so I did not understand it well" (R2, interview), a point about speed that only R2 made explicitly, and wrote that their English "too often has its accent 'Mandarinized'" (R2, written response). R3 wrote that "sometimes the accent is difficult to understand for some words" (R3, written response).

These reports are consistent with the view that listening in a second language is an effortful process shaped by the speed and form of the input (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Richards, 2008) and that listeners often struggle to divide fast connected speech into words (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). Difficulty with Taiwan-accented English was also reported by Indonesian students on a Taiwanese campus (Hastowohadi, 2026), which suggests that the issue is not specific to hotels. Thai hotel interns, for their part, showed awareness of English as a lingua franca and accepted non-native accents (Suebwongsuwan & Nomnian, 2020).

A second barrier was that workplace talk was dominated by Mandarin. R2 reported that "most co-workers use Mandarin in their daily conversation" (R2, interview) and, asked what was hard to catch, answered, "Many, because we ourselves cannot speak Mandarin yet" (R2, written response). R1 said, "There is no shared language to use for communication" (R1, interview), and R3 described co-workers who "cannot speak English at all" (R3, interview). R3 also said that co-workers communicated in Mandarin mixed with English and that when directions were given this way, "I was confused," so R3 "asked again while pointing: is it this,

this, or this?" (R3, interview). R1 gave an example of unclear directions: R1 was told to fetch a fan but fetched toilet tissue, because the colleague "only gave a gesture as direction" and used "ambiguous English" (R1, written response).

This finding is best described as a contextual application of Richards' (2008) account of listening to a multilingual workplace. Richards already treats listening as drawing on contextual knowledge and expectation (Richards, 2008) and notes that speakers have many accents, including non-native ones (Richards, 2008). What this setting adds is that the language in play at work was often not English: Mandarin appeared alongside English as a factor in whether an instruction was understood, and the interns were still learning it. This comes from three participants and is offered as a suggestion for further work. English was only one of several resources for the interns. Studies that treat multilingual speakers as users of an integrated repertoire rather than as imperfect speakers of a single language (Cook, 1992; Grosjean, 1989) and research on lingua franca English in transnational mobility (Gallagher, 2024) support looking at all the languages in play. The finding also agrees with the review by Wilczewski & Alon (2023), which identifies host-language proficiency as a central theme in international students' adaptation, and with Ward & Kennedy's (1999) definition of sociocultural adaptation as the ability to manage everyday interaction, which in housekeeping consists largely of understanding short instructions.

Participants also described host colleagues whose English proficiency varied. R1 reported that none of the hotel workers was fluent ("none of them is fluent," R1, interview), although elsewhere R1 said that among supervisors "some do not know English at all, some are fluent, and some are moderate" (R1, written response). R3 reported that a supervisor "can also speak English," whereas co-workers "cannot speak English at all" (R3, interview), and wrote that "there are those who are fluent and those who are not," although supervisors rated higher "because my co-workers are not very fluent" (R3, written response). R1 offered a contrasting view and described interns' and superiors' English as balanced, "I think it is balanced" (R1, written response), which is treated here as a comparison and not as support. These statements appear to conflict. They may refer to different groups (hotel workers in general in the first statement and supervisors in the second), to different situations, or to different meanings of "fluent". The excerpts reported here do not show which of these R1 meant, and R3's account of supervisors and co-workers makes a difference between groups possible without settling the question. The ambiguity is therefore retained: R1's statements are reported as given, and the theme is written as varied English proficiency among host colleagues, not as a claim that colleagues were uniformly fluent or uniformly limited. Research on English as a lingua franca suggests that speakers without a shared first language often manage communication by cooperating (Firth, 1996; Jenkins, 2006), and the participants' continued ability to work despite limited English is consistent with this. The differing views about supervisors and co-workers, however, show that no single pattern can be assumed.

Finally, participants linked misunderstanding to situational and early-stage conditions. R1 described that at the start, just after arriving in Taiwan, "I was in a state of exhaustion and was told to work right away," and that "it is not only English that has to be digested, but Mandarin too" (R1, interview). R2 described being called from a distance: "We were quite far apart, so my co-worker kind of shouted to call me, 'Give me sheet,' and the voice was rather loud, so I thought I had made a mistake." R2 reflexively said, "What, shit?" until the colleague

said, "No no, not shit," and demonstrated what was meant; R2 realized, "I had simply misheard the word sheet as shit" (R2, written response). R3 described a similar misunderstanding during a lunch break. A colleague shouted from outside the room, "Chī fàn le!" (Let's eat!), but because the vacuum cleaner was rather noisy, R3 heard "Jiābān le!" (Overtime!). R3 thought another room had to be cleaned and the current work had to be finished quickly, and answered immediately, "Hǎo, Gē!" (Okay, older brother!, used for a male co-worker), while finishing the work. When the colleague came back, surprised to see R3 still working, the colleague used a gesture, one hand miming eating and the other signaling stop, and said "Eat, eat!" and "no work, go eat eat!" After R3 explained that the call had been misheard, the colleague laughed and shook their head (R3, written response). Models of second-language listening emphasize linguistic and cognitive processes (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021), and the use of context and expectation when the signal is unclear (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Richards, 2008). The accounts of R2 and R3, in which a call heard across a distance or over noise was interpreted as a possible reprimand or as an order to work overtime, are consistent with this. R1's fatigue can be linked to Oberg's (1960) description of the strain of the effort required to adjust in a new setting. Together, these accounts suggest that second-language listening at work depends on noise, distance, and tiredness as well as on proficiency, a dimension that is less visible in research on campus adaptation (Hastowohadi, 2026; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

Theme 2. Productive Communication Barriers

The clearest productive barrier was reported only by R1, and it should be read as an individual experience: the language that came out was not the language intended. R1 described that "when the *juren* [supervisor or head of section] asks me something, I certainly answer in English, but what comes to mind is Mandarin" (R1, interview). The reverse also happened: "with *jie-jie*, sometimes I want to use English but Mandarin comes out" (R1, written response), and R1 wrote that "what often happens when I want to speak to my superior is that I often want to say something in Mandarin, but reflexively say it in English" (R1, written response). R1 gave "one small one big" as an example of this switching, in which Mandarin was intended but English came out; R1 explained that it happened when asked something like "is this the small one or the big one" in the context of being asked to fetch a towel (R1, written response).

Code-switching is usually discussed as a communication strategy that speakers choose (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). R1's account describes a switch that happened reflexively and against intention, which resembles research on bilinguals' shifting between language modes (Grosjean, 1989) and, by analogy, research on the use of the first language in second language production (Poulisse & Bongaerts, 1994), although the two languages involved here, English and Mandarin, are both additional languages for R1. For an intern who works in Mandarin with some people and in English with others, the choice of language may not always be under control. As only one participant reported it, the finding calls for further study before any pattern can be claimed.

All three participants described moments when they lacked the words to convey a message. R1 recalled a guest's child with a peanut allergy: "I did not know the Mandarin words for it... I had no choice but to ask for help, to ask the supervisor for help" (R1, interview). R2 said that when unsure what to do and "I did not know how to express it," R2 usually used translation or gestures to ask (R2, interview). R3 wanted to complain about a co-worker to a

supervisor, but this "needed several English sentences that I was still unsure about" (R3, interview).

These reports illustrate strategies used when a speaker lacks the language, such as appealing for assistance, which are well established in the literature on communication strategies (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Tarone, 1980). The peanut-allergy incident suggests how the stakes may shape the demand: a guest's safety depended on a precise message, and the intern solved the problem by involving a more capable speaker. This is relevant to Chen et al. (2023), who found that students perceived their language competency as adequate while practitioners felt interns needed to improve. This single incident does not test that difference, but it may indicate that competency that feels adequate for routine tasks can be challenged when messages are urgent or sensitive, which suggests that guest-safety vocabulary could be considered in preparation programs.

R2 and R3 also described hesitation and the time needed to respond. R2 reported that "sometimes I need time to understand the question and compose an answer" and felt "embarrassed and afraid of making mistakes" (R2, interview). R3 first gave "an expression of not knowing or of wondering" [a puzzled facial expression] and then a short answer in English (R3, interview). R1, in contrast, described answering directly, "without translating it first" (R1, interview), which is treated here as a comparison. These accounts can be read in light of research on willingness to communicate, which proposes that readiness to speak a second language depends on situational confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998), and of the fear of negative evaluation described in foreign language anxiety research (Horwitz et al., 1986). The differences between R1 and the others suggest that spontaneity may vary with the speaker and the situation.

Theme 3. Coping Strategies and Contextual Support

Interactional and Non-Linguistic Strategies

All three participants relied on gestures, clarification requests, and translation applications. R1 described three steps: "The first thing I look at is the body gesture... if I still don't understand, I ask them to repeat... if still not, Google Translate. Those are my three steps" (R1, interview), and called gestures "my ninja way" (R1, interview). R2 reported that colleagues "usually explain using gestures" and that "they usually use translate so that I can understand more easily" (R2, interview), and R2 sometimes used "body gestures so that they understand what I mean" (R2, written response). R3 waited until colleagues finished speaking and then used "body language," giving a signal of not understanding (R3, interview), and used the Google Translate application (R3, interview). R2 called Google Translate "my main savior" (R2, interview), and R1 and R2 described using it reflexively (R1 and R2, written response).

Gestures, asking for repetition and clarification, and appealing for help all appear in established taxonomies of communication strategies (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Tarone, 1980), as in the repetition requests and non-verbal cues of Thai hotel interns (Noobutra, 2026). Research on gesture use among second-language speakers also links it to proficiency, although that evidence remains limited (López-Ozieblo, 2023). What stands out in this study is how routine these strategies were: all three participants used them, and R2 reported that colleagues also reached for gestures and translation tools. This is consistent with the lingua franca view that understanding is built through negotiation (Firth, 1996; Jenkins, 2006; Thongphut & Kaur,

2023), with the attention to non-verbal communication in hospitality interns' service encounters (Malate et al., 2023), and with Indonesian students' use of body language and Google Translate in Taiwan (Hastowohadi, 2026). Whether translation tools support language learning or replace it is a question this study cannot answer.

Linguistic Strategies and Learning

Participants also used linguistic strategies. R2 tried "simple English that is easy to understand" and "simpler words" (R2, interview), R3 gave "a short answer in English" (R3, interview), and R1 answered with short English phrases such as "yes it's finished" or "not yet" and described mixing languages when Mandarin was not enough (R1, written response). Learning Mandarin was a longer-term strategy. R1 studied Mandarin independently for about three months and found this "very influential" (R1, interview). R2 tried "to remember new vocabulary" and began to understand some Mandarin words "over time" (R2, interview). R3 described using Mandarin (referred to by R3 as "*bahasa Taiwan*") "little by little while learning it" (R3, interview).

Simplifying and mixing languages resemble message reduction and code-switching in the taxonomy of Dörnyei & Scott (1997). The gradual learning of Mandarin on the job fits experiential learning, in which learning grows from concrete experience and reflection (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), and is consistent with the link between host-language skills and sociocultural adaptation (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

Orientation and Workplace Support

The participants described preparation that did not address language. R1 reported, "There was no orientation; I was just told to join in learning while working" (R1, written response). R2 reported that the hotel had "its own SOP," that "as for help with language, there was none," and that "the SOP there was general, not an SOP for interns" (R2, written response). R3 described being directed to watch co-workers and then "follow while learning" (R3, interview). Supportive colleagues partly compensated. R1 first assumed Taiwanese colleagues would be very cold and, because of their discipline, would allow no room for mistakes, but "it turned out not to be so; they were still friendly while teaching me again" (R1, written response), R2 was grateful that some co-workers "were willing to help explain the work simply" and made R2 feel "more comfortable at work" (R2, interview), and R3 was grateful for "co-workers who are very kind and always help" (R3, written response).

Preparation before an internship and cultural adaptation during it have been identified as important elements of international students' hospitality internships (Zhu et al., 2023). The absence of language support in orientation is consistent with practitioners' view, reported by Chen et al. (2023), that interns need to improve their language competency, with Lin & Tseng's (2020) suggestion that coursework should better train workplace oral communication, and with the barriers reported by Indonesian English department students in an international internship in Thailand (Ramadhani & Poedjiastutie, 2020). The support from colleagues agrees with research linking contact with host nationals to sociocultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Because this support seemed to depend on colleagues' goodwill rather than on a structure, hotels that want it to be reliable might build it into orientation.

In sum, Themes 1 to 3 show that receptive and productive barriers were multilayered

and that participants dealt with them mainly through shared, informal, and non-linguistic strategies rather than through formal support.

Theme 4. Noticing Taiwanese Workplace Norms

Work Organization and Time Discipline

All three participants noticed strict punctuality. R1 said that "it was like being rewired, reset regarding time discipline" (R1, interview). R2 reported that "if we start at eight, they even arrive thirty minutes before working hours" (R2, interview) and was "a little shocked by the discipline of the people there" (R2, written response). R3 said that "when we start at nine, we must already be at the workplace fifteen minutes before nine" (R3, interview). R2 and R3 described the work as structured: R2 said that "everyone is responsible for their tasks and follows instructions well" (R2, interview), and R3 described it as "structured and results-oriented" and "more detailed in their work" (R3, interview). R2 and R3 also commented on pay and recognition. R2 wrote that, in terms of salary, it was "very different, far apart" (R2, written response), in a comment on how Taiwanese work differs from Indonesian work, and R3 said that "the difference in salary alone is already a stark contrast" and that "however small our work is, it is always appreciated" (R3, interview); R3 also mentioned that overtime had to be paid according to law, which is treated as supporting evidence only. Both comments followed questions that invited comparison, so they are reported with caution. Finally, R1 and R3 contrasted Taiwanese and Indonesian norms: R1 perceived that "Indonesian culture tends to be relaxed in aspects of work, whereas in Taiwan they are rather rigid" (R1, interview), and R3 perceived Indonesian work as emphasizing "group harmony and flexibility" (R3, interview), while describing the Taiwanese work environment as "very comfortable" and "more motivating" (R3, interview).

The emphasis on discipline resembles the surprise at strict regulations reported by Indonesian students in Taiwan (Hastowohadi, 2026) and the differences in school and relationship norms reported by Indonesian interns in Thailand (Ramadhani & Poedjiastutie, 2020). In Byram's (1997) terms, noticing these practices reflects knowledge of social practices (*savoirs*), and it also reflects the cognitive facet of cultural intelligence (Wawrosz & Jurášek, 2023). R1's remark that the new discipline carried over after the internship suggests that cultural learning may last beyond the placement, although this comes from one participant (Theme 5). Because the contrasts with Indonesia are perceptions, they should not be read as descriptions of either country's work culture.

Interpersonal Communication and Hierarchy

Participants described different communication styles, and their accounts were not identical. R1 described professional, work-bounded relations: there was "no formal language for superiors," and "even though there is a hierarchy, it is not very visible"; as for flattering or seeking favor from superiors, R1 said there was none beyond "the limits of work" (R1, interview), an individual experience. R1 also perceived that a colleague as old as R1's mother was treated as "an older sister" and was not respected as such a person would be in Indonesia (R1, interview); this, too, is an individual experience. R1 and R3 described communication as direct: R1 as "short, concise, clear," and R3 as "to the point," adding that "the level of formality is high" (R3, interview). Only R2 described gentle correction directly, as a "soft-spoken" style

in which reprimands were "said privately, not shouting" (R2, written response), an individual experience.

The accounts differ on formality: R1 perceived no formal register for superiors, whereas R3 perceived high formality. This difference can be located in the two accounts, but its cause cannot be determined. With one participant per hotel, hotel conditions and individual experience are closely entangled, and the accounts were also given at different times (R1 after returning to Indonesia, R3 while still working in Taiwan). The difference therefore shows that "Taiwanese communication style" should not be treated as uniform, but it does not show that style varied by hotel. Bao et al. (2021) examined how value differences between employees and supervisors, including power distance orientation, affect speaking up behavior in the hospitality industry. The present study did not examine power distance or speaking up, so this work is noted only as a possible lens on the differences in formality toward superiors described above. Ramadhani & Poedjiastutie (2020) also reported differences in teacher–student relationships among Indonesian interns. In Byram's (1997) terms, interpreting and relating such practices (*savoir comprendre*) required each intern to read the specific workplace instead of relying on a general idea of Taiwanese culture.

Theme 5. Cultural Adaptation and Personal Growth

Initial Responses

All three participants described uncomfortable feelings at the start. R1 felt "reluctant to play around with them" and would "think twice before joking" (R1, interview), and described that "everything was feared" when first trying (R1, interview). R2 felt "nervous and uncomfortable because everything was still new" (R2, interview). R3 said, "I certainly experienced what is called cultural shock" (R3, interview). These feelings were not permanent. R1 wrote that the assumption that colleagues would be very cold turned out to be wrong in R1's experience (R1, written response). R2 "started to feel happy at work" and became "more open, patient, and willing to understand other people's habits," seeing cultural differences as "normal when working with people from different backgrounds" (R2, interview). R3 said, "Now I can already understand" (R3, interview).

The early unease corresponds to classic descriptions of culture shock as anxiety and strain in a new setting (Oberg, 1960) and to the distinction between psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1993), and newly arrived Indonesian students in Taiwan likewise reported culture shock and difficulty adapting (Rahman et al., 2020). R2's fear of mistakes parallels the fear of negative evaluation in foreign language anxiety research (Horwitz et al., 1986), and R1's reluctance to joke shows how language and cultural uncertainty can limit closeness at work, which may matter because informal contact was a source of support (Theme 3). The later openness reflects the attitudes of openness and respect that Deardorff (2006) identifies as the basis of intercultural competence.

Behavioral Adaptation

Participants adapted mainly by following local norms. R1 said, "I will not impose my norms; I will follow theirs," reasoned that "we are newcomers, so we must follow them, we must adapt," and reported, "ninety-nine percent I try to adjust to them" (R1, interview). As an example, R1 described being someone who is "slow to load" [Indonesian slang for being slow

or sluggish] and stays relaxed when possible, whereas colleagues wanted things done quickly, so getting ready, which usually took two hours, now had to take fifteen minutes (R1, interview). R1 also "held myself back so much" and described keeping a "poker face" while "inside it is all turmoil" (R1, interview). R2 tried to follow workplace rules (R2, interview), and R3 reported that "I must follow how work culture is in Taiwan" and adjusted "communication style dynamically" (R3, interview). R2 alone described observing colleagues, asking when unsure, being "polite, patient, and willing to learn," and greeting colleagues first (R2, interview and written response), an individual experience.

Observing and following local norms is consistent with the behavioral and cognitive aspects of cultural intelligence, which supports intercultural adjustment (Chu & Zhu, 2023; Wawrosz & Jurášek, 2023), and with Byram's (1997) skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*). R1's description of adjusting almost entirely to the host culture resembles an assimilation-leaning orientation in Berry's (2005) typology of acculturation strategies. R1's emotional management shows that adaptation involved regulating feelings as well as behavior, a point that supports treating psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation as related but different (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Lai et al., 2023).

Outcomes and Critical Reflection

All three participants reported personal changes, and for R1 these persisted after returning to Indonesia. R1 said, "I feel it only now that I am back here, the 'rubber time,' my heart pounds if I am late," and that R1's confidence "has greatly increased" (R1, interview). R2 said that "my confidence has increased compared to when I first started the internship program" and no longer felt the need to wait until able to speak perfectly before communicating (R2, interview). R3 wrote that confidence had "greatly increased" (R3, written response). R2 also reported a changed view of communication, as "not only about the ability to speak English fluently, but also about listening, asking, and trying to understand others," and learned to "follow instructions, respect superiors, and be responsible for my work" (R2, interview), an individual experience. R1 alone offered a critical reflection: "We should have brought our identity too and not held back so much, so that there would be cultural exchange," "we learn their discipline, they learn our relaxedness," and "I regret it" (R1, interview). R1 advised future interns to "find more friends" and to "act up a little" as long as it did not go "beyond the limits" (R1, interview).

Growing confidence is in line with the argument that willingness to communicate grows with experience and confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998) and with sociocultural adaptation as a skill acquired through everyday contact (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). R2's view that communication is more than fluent speech agrees with the lingua franca emphasis on cooperation over accuracy (Jenkins, 2006). R1's reflection can be read as a move toward a more reciprocal orientation, for example from assimilation toward integration in Berry's (2005) terms, and as critical cultural awareness in Byram's (1997) model (*savoir s'engager*), but this appeared in only one participant, so it should be regarded as an individual reflection and not as a pattern. Hammer et al. (2003) describe intercultural sensitivity as developing toward more flexible orientations to difference, and R1's and R2's accounts may be consistent with such development. R1 and R2 spoke after their internships ended, and R3 spoke while still working, so the sense of growth may differ in kind between participants.

Theme 6. the Interrelation of Language and Culture

Asked what caused misunderstandings, R1 and R2 named both language and culture. R1 said, "I think it is both" (R1, interview), and R2 said that misunderstandings were "caused by both, namely language barriers and cultural differences" (R2, interview), and wrote that "the cause is certainly the different language and culture" (R2, written response). R3 differed and attributed misunderstandings mainly to language: "differences of language... because I have limited vocabulary in Mandarin" (R3, interview, referred to as "bahasa Taiwan"). This difference is kept as a divergent case.

Participants also described cultural difference emerging through communication behavior. R1 recalled that interns chatting normally but loudly were taken to be quarrelling: "They were shocked because their culture is not like that" (R1, interview). R3 described the "to the point" speaking style as a cultural challenge (R3, interview). Language learning was seen as a way into the culture. R2 tried to "learn more deeply about their culture and language" (R2, interview), and R3 said that understanding of interaction had grown "because I also understand some vocabulary" of Mandarin (R3, interview).

This theme brings the two objectives together. Byram's (1997) model places linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence alongside intercultural competence, so that language and culture are treated as parts of one communicative competence, and the participants' accounts illustrate this in practice. The loud-speech example shows that a behavior that is normal in one culture can be read differently in another even when no language error occurs, and the report that learning Mandarin helped R2 and R3 understand interaction suggests that language learning and cultural understanding developed together. Chen (2025) and Wilczewski & Alon (2023) likewise identify language and culture as central to adaptation. The contribution of this study is to illustrate, in housekeeping work, how different incidents were read as language problems, cultural problems, or situational problems, depending on the participant and the circumstance.

Integrating the Findings

Taken together, the findings show that the housekeeping internship was a setting in which receptive and productive difficulties, workplace conditions, and cultural norms interacted. Participants did not describe themselves as unable to communicate. They described a workplace where many interactions took place without a fully shared language and therefore relied on gestures, clarification, translation applications, observation, and goodwill. For the first objective, participants reported receptive barriers of accent, Mandarin-dominant talk, varied English proficiency among colleagues, and situational conditions, and productive barriers of unintended language choice, lexical gaps, and hesitation. For the second objective, they perceived disciplined and structured workplaces with varied communication styles and described adapting by following local norms, with growing confidence. The participants also differ. R1 emphasized accent, language switching, and a retrospective, critical view of adaptation; R2 emphasized speech speed, limited Mandarin, and a soft-spoken style; R3 emphasized vocabulary limits and formality while still working in Taiwan. Some of these differences can be located in the accounts: R1 and R3 differed on formality toward superiors, gentle correction was reported only by R2, and R1 and R2 spoke after returning whereas R3 was still working. Why they differ remains a set of possible explanations: hotel conditions,

supervisors, personalities, and the timing of data collection. Because each hotel is represented by one participant, hotel conditions and individual experience are closely entangled and cannot be separated here, especially for formality and support. The number of Indonesian interns also differed by hotel according to the participants (four, three, and two), but this study did not examine whether this relates to these differences. Other accounts came from all three participants, each in a different hotel, such as the lack of language support in orientation and the help of colleagues (Theme 3), although the form differed (no orientation for R1, a general SOP for R2, and watching co-workers for R3). The differences remind readers that "the Taiwanese workplace" is not one environment. The convergence is nevertheless clear: all three used gestures and translation tools, all three reported initial discomfort, and all three described adapting.

Implications

Theoretically, the study suggests that Richards' (2008) receptive and productive skills and Byram's (1997) intercultural components complement each other in workplace internships: the first explains where understanding or expression broke down, and the second explains how interns made sense of the host workplace. It also applies Richards' framework to a multilingual workplace, where Mandarin appeared alongside English as a source of barriers, and it reports situational conditions of noise, distance, and fatigue.

For practice, three implications follow. First, pre-departure programs for hospitality interns could include Mandarin listening and speaking for short work instructions, numbers, items, and guest-related safety information such as allergies, together with exposure to accented English. This responds to practitioners' view, reported by Chen et al. (2023), that interns need to improve their language competency. Second, hotels could ask supervisors to give brief, clear instructions, to reduce noise before speaking, to check understanding, and to use visual aids, and could provide an orientation that explains work norms and communication styles. Third, universities could prepare students for varied communication styles and for adapting while keeping their own identity, which R1's reflection highlights, and could use reflective activities during the internship to support experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several limitations. It involved only three participants from one program, so the findings cannot be statistically generalized, although the detailed description allows readers to judge transferability. Several codes were supported by only one participant and are reported as individual experiences. Data came from participants' own accounts and were collected online, and no workplace observation was possible. Two participants were interviewed after their internships and one during an extended contract, so recall and exposure differ. This is relevant to findings that look back on the placement, such as the early-stage exhaustion described by R1 (Theme 1) and R1's critical reflection on adaptation (Theme 5), both given in an interview after R1 had returned to Indonesia, whereas R3 spoke while still working. Some interview questions invited comparisons, which may have shaped certain responses. Follow-up responses were written through instant messaging, so findings that rest on them, such as the misunderstanding incidents reported by R1, R2, and R3 in Theme 1, depend on what participants wrote, and dialogue within these incident accounts is

remembered speech, not wording recorded at the time. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and excerpts were translated into English, so interpretations that depend on wording, such as R1's reluctance to joke and R1's advice about preserving identity (Theme 5), also depend on translation, although these expressions were checked against the recording (see Data collection). Part of the coding was prepared with AI assistance. All of these may affect how closely the findings mirror participants' meanings. Because every quoted excerpt is labeled by participant and as an interview or written response, and Table 1 shows each participant's status when interviewed, readers can see which findings rest on written responses, on accounts given after return, or on translated excerpts; the coding table records the source and role of each excerpt. Perceptions of colleagues' English and of Indonesian work culture were not independently assessed.

Future research could include more participants and several hotel types, combine interviews with workplace observation, follow interns longitudinally from pre-departure to return, and include the perspectives of supervisors and co-workers. It could also examine how digital translation tools are used and whether they support or replace language learning, and test pre-departure Mandarin and intercultural programs for hospitality interns.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to describe the receptive and productive language barriers of Indonesian EFL students during housekeeping internships in Taiwanese hotels and to explore how they experienced cultural adjustment. A qualitative case study of three participants, analyzed with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, generated six themes: receptive communication barriers, productive communication barriers, coping strategies and contextual support, noticing Taiwanese workplace norms, cultural adaptation and personal growth, and the interrelation of language and culture. Participants reported difficulty with accent, Mandarin-dominant talk, and noisy or distant conditions, together with unintended language choice and limited vocabulary for important messages. They coped mainly through gestures, clarification, translation applications, and learning Mandarin, perceived Taiwanese workplaces as disciplined and structured, and described adapting by following local norms and gaining confidence. Two participants saw misunderstandings as caused by both language and culture, and one saw them as mainly linguistic. The study contributes a combined view of Richards' language skills, with attention to multilingual communication, and Byram's intercultural competence in a hospitality workplace. Its limitations include the small number of participants, online data based on participants' own accounts recalled at different stages of placement, and AI-assisted translation and coding. Future research should include more participants and workplace observation, and pre-departure and on-site programs could address both Mandarin-dominant communication and unfamiliar workplace norms.

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PARTICIPANT CONSENT

This research was conducted based on informed consent from all participants. Participants received an explanation of the purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits of the research, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All three participants signed a written informed consent form before the interviews took place. Participants were informed, and agreed, that the interviews would be video-recorded and transcribed with an AI transcription tool, and that the anonymized transcripts would be processed with an AI tool to help draft initial codes and translate excerpts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MW conceptualized the research idea, collected and transcribed the data, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. SR and IS supervised the research and contributed to the methodology and the revision of the manuscript. UM and AS served as examiners and provided critical feedback and suggestions that improved the manuscript. All authors confirm that they have read and approved the final version of this manuscript. The percentage contributions for the conceptualization, drafting, and revision of this paper are as follows: MW: 60%, SR: 10%, IS: 10%, UM: 10%, AS: 10%.

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