

INTERNATIONAL INTERNSHIPS, LANGUAGE COMPETENCY, AND EMPLOYABILITY: PERCEPTIONS OF AND GAPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviewed enhanced employability and language competency in the context of international hospitality internships. A multi-method research design was applied to analyze the perceptions of student interns and industry practitioners. Research methods included a questionnaire, interviews with practitioners, and focus group meetings with students. The quantitative techniques used were importance-performance analysis (IPA) and stepwise regression analysis, and the qualitative approach used was thematic analysis. Results showed that both groups' perceptions of employability were closely aligned, though gaps existed regarding perceptions of language competency: practitioners felt interns should improve language competency to strengthen employability; conversely, students perceived their language competency as adequate and emphasized their progress. The analysis also indicated that stress management skills and innovation capabilities significantly impacted students' willingness to remain in the industry. Educators are advised to make joint efforts with hospitality practitioners to help students in improving language competency, communication abilities, and professional knowledge, with the aim of increasing retention rates; as for students, they are advised to partake in language practice that is more interactive and

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grounded in contextually-relevant content, in order to enhance their professional knowledge and competencies, and to aid them in better navigating the international workplace.

INTRODUCTION

A better understanding of the competencies required by university students for facilitating the attainment of their career goals is an issue to which educators and researchers are paying increasing attention. To meet the needs and retain this fastest-growing segment of the workforce, the hospitality industry is struggling to attract and retain Generation Z (i.e. those born between 1995 to 2010) (Heo et al., 2018). This is especially so for students in technical and vocational fields, such as hospitality, where the ever-changing, multicultural, and linguistically diverse environment can result in substantial challenges for those new to the workplace (Lam et al., 2014). From the industry's viewpoint, it is also important to learn more about the competencies of new generation employees to resolve the human capital challenges and lower the direct costs of recruiting new employees (Guilding et al., 2014; Heo et al., 2018). Goh and Lee (2018) found that Generation Z hospitality students held more positive than negative attitudes; however, there were still key difficulties forming barriers to their integration into the hospitality industry. Among these, language proficiency, emotional labor, and pressure to perform are critical competencies in need of being developed before Generation Z employees can successfully perform in the industry. In short, attitudinal and other cognitive gaps may exist between practitioners and Generation Z students.

All of the aforementioned points are relevant to job readiness and career development. In keeping with this, one such institution, a vocational university (hereafter called University A) in Taiwan, requires all undergraduate students to complete internships to facilitate professional learning opportunities and to equip students with strong employability credentials. The majority of students partake in domestic internships within Taiwan, in hotels, restaurants, airports, travel agencies, leisure facilities, and other organizations within hospitality and tourism. In addition to the domestic options, students may also apply for international internships.

Among the international internship options, internships in Singapore are the most popular choice for students in University A. According to the Manpower Research & Statistics Department (2018), the accommodation and food service industry has the highest vacancy rate within Singapore for entry-level workers and operators, with 12.3% of the

entry-level positions regularly remaining unfilled. Although these figures reflect pre-pandemic industry needs, the current post-pandemic return to normalcy occurring worldwide in general, and in Singapore in particular, points to the potential for a plethora of job opportunities for student interns from Taiwan. Moreover, due to the high degree of internationalization found in Singapore, one essential capability that students need in order to successfully participate in Singaporean internships is language competency, particularly English. In Taiwan, however, Chinese is the official language, and although English is taught as a foreign language, students rarely have the opportunity to apply their English language education. Under such circumstances, doing an internship in a location where English is spoken, such as is the case in Singapore, is both encouraged and yet also seen as a challenge.

Since the purposes of internships are for students to implement what they have learned in the classroom and also to help prepare them for post-graduation careers, and since internship program design necessitates cooperation among students, educators, and industry practitioners, it is key that these stakeholder groups understand their roles in making internship programs succeed for the benefit of all involved. Students and industry practitioners stand to benefit if they can align their goals: this alignment has a higher likelihood of success when there is greater overlap in all sides' perspectives and expectations.

Research Questions

The main purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of industry practitioners and student interns concerning their views on interns' language competency and employability and to ascertain the degree to which there was an overlap, or a lack thereof, among the perceptions of these two groups. The following research questions were proposed:

- RQ1. How satisfied are industry practitioners with intern performance?
- RQ2. Are there gaps in perceptions between student interns and industry practitioners regarding the interns' employability?
- RQ3. Are there gaps in perceptions between student interns and industry practitioners regarding interns' English language competency?

INTERNSHIPS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Researchers have shown employability to be a multi-dimensional construct that can be understood in terms of employee attributes, employer preferences, and the larger socioeconomic milieu within which employees and employers operate (Huang, 2013; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Chen et al., 2018).

The main purposes of this research are to better understand how employability relates to successful internship completion as well as to ascertain if there are gaps between practitioners' and interns' perceptions of interns' performance, and these have received much attention in a number of previous studies (Qenani et al., 2014; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Teng et al., 2019). Indeed, according to Qenani et al. (2014), students who have completed internships are 2.5 times more confident than those who have not. Nisbet et al. (2022) applied Quinn et al.'s (2003) competency scale to compare students and supervisors on their perceived importance of competency items, finding discrepancies for nine out of 15 items, including interpersonal communication skills (verbal). Their study concluded by emphasizing the importance of evaluating the outcomes of work integrated learning as perceived by different stakeholders such as students and industry managers.

Thus, given the strong relationship between employability and internships, it is obvious why internships are an important component of student career development. Jackson (2015) described how student communication skills, organizational awareness, and professional knowledge were more likely to accumulate and flourish via the mentoring, team building, self-reflection, and professional portfolio building that are features of many well-designed internships. Additionally, Chen et al. (2018) demonstrated how internship programs are an effective way to strengthen student employability via helping interns to enhance their emotional control and tolerance of pressure, as well as aiding their ability to adapt to change.

In a similar vein, Teng et al. (2019) argued that there is a movement away from an exclusive focus on "hard" employability skills that are formal and technical in nature, to an increased emphasis on "soft" skills which are more social and personal. Examples include interaction with others, self-confidence, and self-reflection. This increased valuation of soft skills places more importance on student attitudes and behaviors, instead of only valuing technical skills and capabilities.

Within the hospitality industry, internships have helped students develop employability. Those with internship experiences have a deeper understanding of the industry, and better know how to develop their future careers. With regard to Taiwanese interns in particular, these observations apply as well. When asked about which skills and capabilities they had improved after completing internships, students indicated that their emotional control and ability to express and communicate had seen gains, but that they were less satisfied with the proficiency in both their native language and hospitality-related foreign language (Chen et al., 2018). These results are consistent with the fact that the students had done their internships in the domestic hospitality industry, where it is easier to work on attitudes and general communication than to improve language competency, particularly for foreign languages. Moreover, in an investigation of the perspectives of both students and supervisors for the purposes of evaluating students' capabilities after partaking in work integrated learning experiences, Jackson (2019) also pointed out how international students' weaknesses in communication are augmented by language deficiencies and a lack of cultural understanding.

Indeed, it bears noting that an international internship can benefit not only students' foreign language development but also their intercultural awareness. Ruhanen et al. (2013) found that international internships can make those interns more employable in the hospitality industry, relative to students who intern in their own countries. Jones (2013) pointed to how internationalization facilitates the development of graduate employability skills by fostering the following competencies: the ability to work with teams of people from different backgrounds; excellent communication skills; resilience and drive, the willingness to embrace multiple perspectives and challenge thinking; and the development of new skills and behaviors according to role requirements. Crossman and Clarke (2010), who sought to better understand the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders (interns, industry practitioners and educators), concluded that all stakeholders identified clear connections between international experiences—including internships—and employability. This connection was particularly seen for employability as manifested in soft skills, including cultural understanding, language competency, and personal traits; a result that was substantiated in other studies (Jones, 2013; Qenani et al., 2014).

Liu et al.'s (2006) employability enhancement framework for Taiwan has been well applied to investigate the employability of university graduates, and hence was used in this research to explore the degree of

employability for students who had completed international internships in Singapore. Their criteria consist of four dimensions: general competencies, professional competencies, attitudes towards work, and career planning and confidence. Contained within these four dimensions are 19 specific career competencies, most of which are sub-components of the larger notion of employability and correlate with internship satisfaction as well (Chen et al., 2018).

LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

Employability includes a wide array of skills, knowledge, and competencies. Among these, language competency must be included, insofar as communication is generally held to be an essential component of employability, and language competency is a primary contributor to communicative ability. Itani et al. (2015) concluded that persons with strong language skills demonstrated the highest levels of psychological and physical career mobility, which enabled these individuals to move across organizational, geographical, and cultural boundaries in workplaces. English competency also correlates with career success in tourism-related industries even in countries where English is used only as a foreign language. Hence, educators in these countries are striving to increase student English proficiency, in order to thereby facilitate their marketability and qualifications (Yamada et al., 2014). In addition, Zainuddin et al. (2019) investigated the relationship of language competency to employability and found that interns and practitioners agreed on the importance played by language competency.

When employees are working in internships and careers in international settings, and where the language used is not necessarily the employees' native tongue, the importance of language competency and its contribution toward employability become even more salient. This particularly applies in hospitality, where languages are important means for the communication and provision of service. For these reasons, it is essential to look more closely at the role that language competency plays in professional contexts and how it affects employability.

The primary dimension of language competency is linguistic ability, or proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Primary though it is, it is certainly no simple feat, as gaining proficiency in each of these facets of language use requires a great deal of time. Moreover, the importance that employers in service-related fields place on hiring employees who possess a strong linguistic ability cannot be

underestimated: in particular, oral communication skills are highly prized. This is seen in Yamada et al.'s (2014) study, which stressed that the most essential skill that employers look for is the employee's ability to speak English effectively and good communication skills. Although strong communication skills and strong language skills are not necessarily equivalent, international interns who are highly proficient in English are poised to develop the requisite communication skills more fully. Consistent with this claim, Jackson (2019) found that international students who were evaluated by industry managers as being weaker in communication typically possessed lower English verbal skills.

For these reasons, to prepare non-native English-speaking students to succeed in the workplace, educators place a great deal of effort on teaching English for professional purposes and occupational needs. Zahedpisheh et al. (2017) pointed out that a curriculum related to tourism service English must be designed based on the needs and wants of learners, emphasizing this in their call for English for Tourism and Hospitality Purposes (ETHP).

However, students from places where English is used as a foreign language, such as Taiwan, lack in opportunities to enhance English oral communication and to come into contact with a greater variety of cultural backgrounds, due to fewer venues for practicing English outside of the classroom (Hsu, 2015). Still, with the benefit of sufficient planning and effort on the part of educators, partnering together with industry, it is possible to work toward curriculum design that better positions students to make gains in communicative competencies.

To conclude, the attainment of optimal employability requires students to have not only industry-specific professional skills, but also to possess communication skills and intercultural awareness. Although communication skills, and intercultural awareness in particular, are difficult to prepare for in advance, it is also the case that efforts made in these areas have the potential to positively impact student experiences in international internships, including their work performance.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The conceptual framework for this research is shown in Figure 1. To better understand how employability influenced student intentions regarding career decisions, it was hypothesized that after an international internship,

enhanced employability influences student intentions to remain in the hospitality industry:

H₁: Student intern employability has a direct effect on their intentions to remain in the hospitality industry.

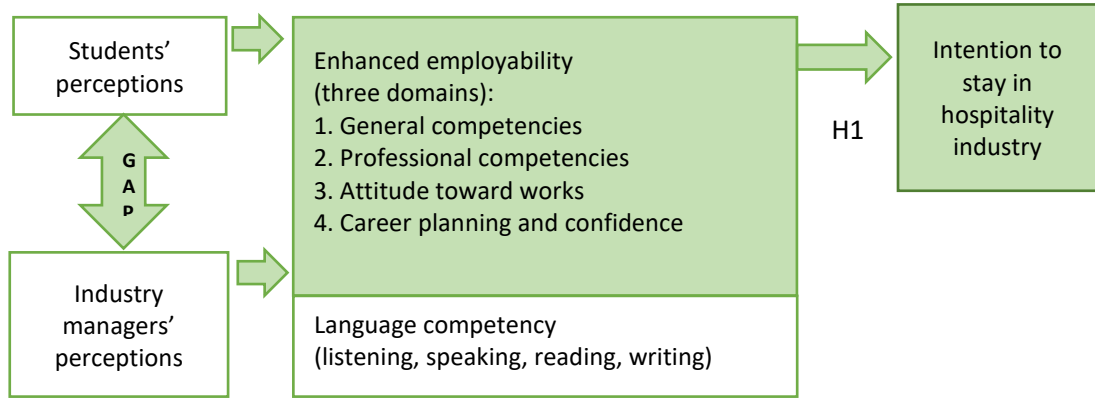


Figure 1. *Research conceptual model*

METHODOLOGY

This research proposed three research questions (RQs) and one hypothesis (H₁). To address these, a mixed method research design was adopted. The quantitative techniques used were importance-performance analysis (IPA) and stepwise regression analysis, and thematic analysis was applied to provide a qualitative perspective.

The first quantitative instrument consisted of a survey completed by industry practitioners. The instrument was adopted from Liu et al. (2006) and Chen et al. (2018), and revised after on the basis of a validity check conducted by three experts. Thirty-two questionnaires were sent via University A's Hotel Human Resource delegation in Singapore. It focused on employability, with some additional company-specific questions. The questionnaire consisted of 25 items and covered the following areas: work performance, professional knowledge, English competency, and skills and abilities (items provided in Table 1). Each item was evaluated regarding two factors, importance and performance, using a five-point Likert scale. The survey ended with three open-ended items on the following topics: practitioner perceptions of how students performed in their establishments, the top three ways in which they felt that students excelled in their performance, and the three areas in which they felt that students most needed to improve.

The second quantitative data source was a survey of 74 students who had completed one-year internships in Singapore—constituting 57% of

University A's students who completed Singaporean internships during the relevant year. This questionnaire was regarding student perceptions of their international internships, based on Wang and Sun's (2014) work. The first two sections focused on background information and degree of English oral competency, respectively. The third section focused on employability enhancement and was based on Chen et al.'s (2018) work.

Chen and Shen (2012), Farmaki (2018), and Jackson (2019) suggested that qualitative methods have valuable insights to offer to the study of internship practice. More specifically, thematic analysis is highly suited to yielding deeper insights from stakeholders, and is widely used in qualitative research. Zopiatis et al. (2021) indicated that much internship qualitative research applied this method, and it can be applied in both primary research and systematic review papers (Pursell & Gould, 2021). Thus, the third and fourth methods of data collection were conducted for the purpose of qualitative analysis.

The third data source was a series of interviews with seven industry practitioners, who were interviewed in their Singaporean hotels. These interviews were based on an exploration of the three topics of discussion that were the focus of the open-ended questions used at the end of the survey.

The fourth data source was a series of focus group interviews held with 32 students, divided into nine groups, to collect in-depth descriptions regarding their international internships in Singapore. For these focus groups, two question threads were used for discussions: first, questions about student perceptions of their strengths and difficulties regarding English language competency in the context of internship performance; second, questions about student perceptions of their strengths and difficulties regarding overall internship performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profiles

As the profiles of the surveyed industry practitioners show (Appendix 1), the Food and Beverage (F&B) department accounted for the highest percentage (47%), followed by Human Resource Management (HRM) supervisors (28.1%); in addition, most respondents were managers (78.1%). The profiles of the surveyed student respondents are shown in Appendix 2. Most respondents were female (81%), and restaurant server was the most common internship position (54%). Professional English courses had been

taken by 72.9% of the students; moreover, thirty-two students (43%) possessed an English certification equivalent to the CEFR B2 level, indicating that their English language competency was at the upper-intermediate level.

Analysis of Industry Practitioner Satisfaction with Intern Performance (RQ1)

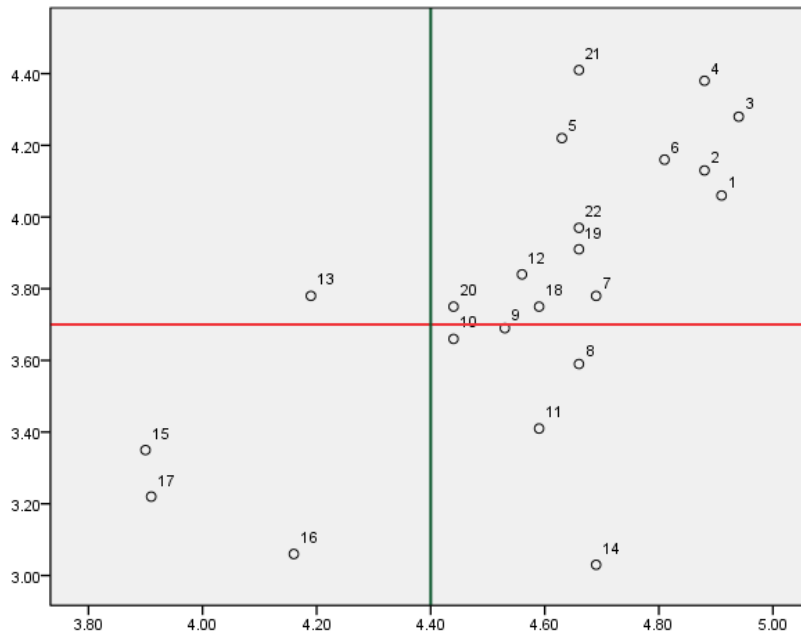
According to the results of the practitioner survey, the mean of the overall satisfaction with the performance of the interns was 4.27 out of 5.00, which demonstrates a good level. The average mean of the importance of employability was 4.56, and that of intern performance was 4.41; hence, the results showed performance was rated slightly lower than importance. Among the variables related to importance, service attitude, responsibility, teamwork, and punctuality had the highest means (Table 1), with work attitude being rated as most important. As for variables related to performance, the highest level of satisfaction was for the interns' willingness to learn new knowledge, punctuality and scheduling ability, and service work attitudes.

Table 1. *Importance and performance rankings by practitioners*

Factors	Items	Importance (rank)	Performance (rank)
Work performance	Work responsibility	4.91 (1)	4.06 (7)
	Teamwork ability	4.88 (3)	4.13 (6)
	Service work attitude	4.94 (2)	4.28 (3)
	Punctuality and scheduling ability	4.88 (3)	4.38 (2)
	Personal grooming	4.63 (11)	4.22 (4)
	Timely and reliable service	4.81 (5)	4.16 (5)
	Emotional ability	4.69 (6)	3.78 (11)
	Stress management	4.66 (8)	3.59 (17)
Professional knowledge	Professional knowledge meets requirements	4.53 (15)	3.69 (15)
	Application of professional knowledge	4.44 (16)	3.66 (16)
	Use of professional language	4.59 (12)	3.41 (18)
	Familiarity with service process	4.56 (14)	3.84 (10)
	Students' professional knowledge	4.19 (18)	3.78 (11)
Skills and abilities	English communication ability	4.69 (6)	3.03 (22)
	Communication ability in other language	3.90 (22)	3.35 (19)
	Handle customer complaints independently	4.16 (20)	3.06 (21)
	Handle promotional activities	3.91 (21)	3.22 (20)
	Interpersonal relationship skills	4.59 (12)	3.75 (13)
	Service skills	4.66 (8)	3.91 (9)
	Understanding company values	4.44 (16)	3.75 (13)
Other	Willing to learn new knowledge and skills	4.66 (8)	4.41 (1)
	Adaptation to rotation	4.66 (8)	3.97 (8)

Note: $n = 32$

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) showed results from the practitioner perspective (Figure 2). At least 13 competencies were located in Quadrant 1, indicating competencies that were deemed important and where interns were perceived to perform well. For Quadrant 2, regarding competencies that were deemed important but where interns were perceived to not perform well, practitioners felt that interns should concentrate and perform better in five important competencies: stress management (3.59), professional knowledge (3.78), application of professional knowledge (3.66), professional language ability (3.41), and communication ability (3.03). Among these competencies, communication and professional language showed the lowest rates of satisfaction. As for the attention paid to stress management and application of professional knowledge, this is consistent with previous research findings (Chen et al., 2018; Teng et al., 2019). Educators should focus more on enhancing these soft skills and communication skills to enhance student employability.



<p>Quadrant 1 (Keep up the good work)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Responsibility 2. Team 3. Service attitude 4. Punctual 5. Grooming 6. Reliable 7. Emotion 12. Service Process 18. Inter Relationship 19. Service Skill 20. Company Value 21. Learn New Knowledge 22. Adaptation Rotation 	<p>Quadrant 2 (Concentrate on these topics)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Stress Management 9. Professional Knowledge Requirement 10. Apply Professional Knowledge 11. Professional Language 14. Communication Ability <p>Quadrant 3 (Low priority)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Communication in Other Languages 16. Handling Complaints 17. Promotion Ability (e.g. upselling) <p>Quadrant 4 (Possible overkill)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Professional Knowledge
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Figure 2. IPA analysis from industry practitioners' perspectives

Student intention to remain in the hospitality industry (H1)

The causal relationship between employability (independent variable) and willingness to remain in the industry (dependent variable) was measured and is shown in Table 2. Stepwise regression analysis was applied to ascertain which employability dimensions influenced the dependent variable.

Table 2. *Summary of the models*

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted r ²	Estimated standard error	Durbin-Watson	F	Significance
1	0.303 ^a	0.092	0.079	1.053		7.258	0.009
2	0.397 ^b	0.157	0.134	1.021	1.949	6.625	0.002

Note. Dependent variable is willingness to remain in the hospitality industry.

^a Predicted variable: constant (60) stress management ($\beta = .303$).

^b Predicted variable: constant (60) stress management ($\beta = .290$); constant (56) innovation ability ($\beta = -0.257$).

Two dimensions demonstrated statistically significant explanatory power regarding willingness to remain in the hospitality industry: stress management at 30.3%, and innovation ability at 39.7%. More specifically, stress management positively affected willingness to remain, whereas innovation ability had a negative impact. The F-value had a statistically significant effect, and the t-value was also statistically significant, showing that there was no collinearity in the model. The regression results supported the hypothesis, insofar as two of the employability dimensions had a direct effect on willingness to remain in the hospitality industry. These two employability dimensions were soft skills, and the means from student perceptions were in the top five and six in international internships (Table 3: stress management, 4.20 (5th); innovation ability 4.19 (6th)). This result is consistent with Crossman and Clarke's (2010) claim that soft skills are connected to employability, and also supports the assertions of Kalfa and Taksa (2015) and Teng et al. (2019) that soft skills are among the most fundamental graduate attributes, and hence educators should pay more attention to them. To sum up, enhanced stress management increases intern willingness to remain in the hospitality industry, whereas enhanced innovation ability reduces willingness. Although the reasons for this discrepancy are not fully apparent and need to await further investigation, this study demonstrated specific areas where soft skills influence intern career decisions.

Comparison of perceptions on employability (R2)

Both the employers and students ranked willingness to learn as the top employability trait. This was seen in both the survey (Table 3) as well as in the interview results, and hence the high level of agreement was maintained not only across the two groups but also across both quantitative and qualitative findings.

Table 3. *Perceptions of employability*

Employability Items	Student interns (<i>n</i> = 74) Mean (rank)	Industry practitioners (<i>n</i> = 32) Mean (rank) from performance in Table 1
Willingness to learn	4.27 (1)	4.41(1)
Professional English language	4.24 (2)	3.41 (18); 3.02 (22)
Understanding of the hospitality industry	4.24 (3)	
Career planning	4.24 (4)	
Stress management	4.20 (5)	3.59 (17); 3.78 (11)
Innovation ability	4.19 (6)	
Adaptability	4.15 (7)	3.97 (8)
Communication ability	4.15 (8)	
Application of professional knowledge	4.14 (9)	3.66 (16)
Devoted to work	4.12 (10)	4.06 (7)
Time management ability	4.09 (11)	Punctual 4.38 (2) Timely and reliable 4.16 (5)
Problem-solving ability	4.08 (12)	
Domestic language	4.05 (13)	3.35 (19)
Teamwork ability	4.01 (14)	4.13 (6)
Leadership ability	3.93 (15)	
Application of computer science	3.92 (16)	
Job searching ability	3.77 (17)	
Professional service and skill	3.59 (18)	
		Professional knowledge and skills: Attitude 4.28 (3) Skills 3.91 (9) Knowledge 3.78 (11) Process familiarity 3.84 (10)
Personal grooming		4.22 (4)
Understanding of company values		3.75 (13)
Interpersonal relationships		3.75 (13)
Handle promotional activities		3.22 (20)
Handle customer complaints		3.06 (21)
Average mean	4.08	3.79
Willingness to remain in the hospitality industry	4.24	
Satisfaction with internship	3.59	

Regarding other employability dimensions, there was a general pattern of agreement as well, although a closer analysis reveals some differences in perspectives. For example, practitioners deemed stress

management and industry-specific professional knowledge to be critical areas wherein interns should put more effort, a result similar to that found in Qenani et al. (2014) and Lou et al. (2019). Conversely, interns perceived their stress management abilities to be somewhat higher than what practitioners perceived, whereas they thought their professional knowledge was lower. In addition, another important performance dimension was intern service attitudes. From the practitioner perspective, intern service attitudes were a strength. Interns did not highlight service attitudes to the same degree, possibly because they had already become accustomed to them in the course of their university studies and hence had come to take them for granted. Attitudes play a crucial role in the hospitality and tourism industry, and the findings regarding their importance to practitioners were consistent with Walsh's et al. (2015) and Lou's et al. (2019) findings that student service orientation and emotional intelligence influence intentions to join the hospitality industry and remain as future practitioners.

To gain deeper insight, practitioners were interviewed in order to understand their viewpoints better. The thematic analysis of their responses in the interviews yielded results consistent with those found in their answers to the open-ended questions at the end of the survey. The most frequently-mentioned advantages were willingness to learn (18); having positive attitudes (15); being hard-working (7); providing good service (7); responsibility (5); and punctuality (5). Moreover, all the disadvantages they mentioned were related to intern English proficiency. One advantage mentioned by practitioners was related to attitudes and capabilities, as can be seen in the following quotes:

"Their strength is their capability. They learn quickly and are eager to learn." and "They learn really fast. Moreover, after learning, they are able to operate on their own, even alone. The progress is outstanding." (SQ P09)

These findings are consistent with the aforementioned claims regarding the importance of soft skills, and how these skills contribute invaluablely to the enhancement of international internship experiences (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Jones, 2013; Qenani et al., 2014; Ruhanen et al., 2013). As this research demonstrates, intern attitudes and dedication to work made the strongest and most positive impressions on industry practitioners.

Comparison of perceptions on language competency (R3)

As shown in the IPA (Figure 2), the gap between the importance of, and the satisfaction with, language competency clarified that practitioners believed that interns should put more effort into professional language and communication abilities. Moreover, in the interviews, the practitioners expressed that interns should have more confidence in speaking English, and at the same time did not indicate that intern language competency was a strength. The above findings echoed Jackson's (2019) observations that international students' lower English verbal skills tend to hinder their communicative competence.

Practitioners, in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, highlighted the importance of language competency and emphasized how intern language competencies tended to lag.

"We understand that they are still learning how not to upset the guests when they are using the language, but the guests who come to 5-star hotels expect us to speak English with proficiency, so we need to focus on this part." (SQ P1)

Although the managers understood that student proficiency in English was low, they nonetheless emphasized interns' need to attain the proficiency needed to deliver the high quality of customer service required in upscale hotels. This finding is consistent with Leong and Li's (2011) result regarding the discrepancy between graduate English proficiency and employer expectations, suggesting the need for more communication among educators, students, and industry practitioners to better clarify expectations. Moreover, these results are also in line with Qenani et al.'s (2014) findings regarding the importance of oral communication as a key factor in influencing intern employability.

Interestingly, this consistency in practitioner perceptions was at variance with some of the findings for the interns. The interns expressed at least some level of satisfaction with their language competency—in contrast to the consistently-low ratings given to them by practitioners. This result suggested that practitioners and interns were very likely operating with different beliefs about intern language competency, which could result in interns failing to recognize a key dimension in which practitioners would like to see improvement. After conducting the focus group interviews with the students, there were 96 items related to language competency. Among these, approximately one-third were strengths, including being proficient in producing a native-like accent and possessing strong listening comprehension. The other two-thirds were challenges, with the following

appearing multiple times: inadequate English proficiency, inadequate formal English, lack of industry-specific English, poor conversation skills and social interaction (including small talk skills), lack of familiarity with accents and code-switching in Singapore, and lack of knowledge of local hospitality vocabulary. However, even though the students were twice as likely to point out their language competency challenges as compared to their strengths, they nonetheless held largely positive views of their internship experiences in Singapore, including the excellent opportunity it afforded them to improve their English proficiency. This phenomenon suggests that students are likely to concur with Itani et al.'s (2015) observations on the correlation of strong language skills with high levels of psychological and physical career mobility: that is to say, the students in this study seek to embrace the challenges to improve their language competency in order to move across organizational, geographical, and cultural boundaries in workplaces.

One interesting point mentioned repeatedly was that the “Singlish” (Singaporean English) accent was hard for them to understand at the beginning of their internships; however, as they became accustomed to it, they not only understood but moreover began speaking in Singlish, as one student put it:

“Many locals dare to express and speak in different accents with fluency. But those words are a mix of English, Malay, and Chinese. We sometimes feel more comfortable in this way without grammar.” (S02)

This had the effect of leading them to believe that English was not so difficult to use, and they found themselves becoming less preoccupied with grammatical accuracy, and more capable of speaking fluently. At the same time, formal English was still seen as important for executing their job duties satisfactorily. Some students said:

“I have a hard time using polite English” and “My difficulty is handling the complaining guests. It’s hard to find the right words to apologize to the guests in a polite way” (S08)

These statements from students point for the need for English language training to be designed based on the hospitality contextual environment, and emphasized the intercultural adeptness required to meet interns’ needs (Zahedpisheh et al., 2017).

Still, it bears noting that the qualitative data for the two stakeholder groups showed some areas of consistency, insofar as both practitioners and interns mentioned the tendency of interns to be shy and lacking in

confidence when speaking English. Indeed, both groups suggested that interns need to practice more in a work-related context. In addition, the survey results showed the two agreed on the importance of language competency, with practitioners and interns ranking it near the top in terms of its role in enhancing employability.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to contribute to the discussion on student employability and the role of language competency within it, using the perceptions of different stakeholders in the context of internship programs, and including both quantitative and qualitative methods. Some alignment between the perspectives of students and industry practitioners was found, especially regarding the important role played by soft skills in student enhanced employability after completing international internships. It was found that the soft skills of stress management and innovation ability had a direct effect on student intentions to stay in the hospitality industry after graduation, with stress management having a positive effect, whereas innovation ability had a negative effect. Also, stakeholders demonstrated similar viewpoints regarding intern attributes, both groups deeming a good working attitude and the willingness to work hard and learn to be the key advantages that the students demonstrated during their internships.

However, there were perceptual gaps as well. In particular, their perspectives on language competency revealed discrepancies, particularly in the quantitative analysis data. More specifically, practitioners felt intern language competency constituted a key dimension that Taiwanese interns need to improve upon to strengthen their employability. Students were somewhat more likely to perceive their language competency as adequate and emphasized the progress that they were making.

Although these differences are not contradictory per se, they indicate a difference in emphasis between the two groups. For example, practitioners may be more future-oriented and are anticipating what the students will need after graduating when they enter the workforce as full-time employees. Students appear to be more present-oriented, insofar as their comments on their language competency were more consistent with a focus on what they were capable of within the context of internships, where the demands made upon them are likely to be less demanding than what they would face as full-time employees after graduation. Generally, it appears that practitioners observed intern language proficiency and found it wanting. This suggests a need to implement more effective teaching

strategies regarding English conversation skills in the classroom and to provide more opportunities to speak English.

International internships may be one of the most effective ways to enhance student communication skills; however, before internships, more effort should be made to achieve the requisite English level needed to work in the industry. According to Zou et al. (2019), English competency influences service quality in the hospitality industry. Strong proficiency improves service quality, whereas poor proficiency runs the risk of leading to dissatisfied customers and hence may diminish customer loyalty. Hsu (2014) also mentioned that attaining a satisfactory level of English communication with guests is a challenge to hotel practitioners in Chinese-speaking countries. Hence, he recommended that hoteliers should work with educators to better prepare students to have stronger English proficiency, especially in speaking and listening. Other researchers have also supported the finding that English language competency plays a major role in employability and have suggested that educators and industry human resource practitioners place more effort on better preparing the future workforce in their respective industries (Yamada et al., 2014; Zainuddin et al., 2019).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research only explored one international internship (Singapore); future studies should explore a wider array of international settings in different cultural contexts. Another limitation is the use of a relatively small sample size; only 74 student respondents from a single university in Taiwan. Further studies are needed to validate the results, especially using samples from different universities. Regarding the international experiences, this research analyzed an exclusively work-based international internship; however, internship program design covers more than just this type, including domestic internships as well as international internships that have academic study components. Hence, there should be a closer look at a greater number of variables, to see how different internship experiences influence student language competency and employability. Finally, this research considered just two stakeholder groups, students and industry practitioners. Future research should also include the perspectives of educators, especially since they are the group responsible for curriculum design and are hence best placed to lead the way in helping students prepare for internships.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Profiles of industry practitioner respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Department	HRM	9	28.1
	Housekeeping	2	6.3
	Front Office	3	9.4
	Kitchen	3	9.4
	F&B	15	46.9
	Total	32	100.0
Position	Supervisor	4	12.5
	Manager/Director	25	78.1
	Chef	1	3.1
	Subtotal	30	93.8
Missing values		2	6.3
Total		32	100.0

Note. $n = 32$

Appendix 2. Profiles of student intern respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	60	81.1
	Male	14	18.9
Department	Front office	5	6.7
	Front office + Restaurant service	6	8.1
	Housekeeping	1	1.3
	Bell service	1	1.3
	Kitchen	7	9.5
	Restaurant service	40	54.1
	Bartender	6	8.1
	Others in rooms division	8	10.8
English learning	1–10 years	30	40.6
	11–15 years	27	36.5
	16 or more years	11	14.9
Professional English courses	Yes	54	72.9
	No	20	27.0
TOEIC Certification ($n = 46$)	550 and below	15	20.3
	551–600	5	6.8
	601–700	9	12.2
	701–800	12	16.2
	801 and above	5	6.8
TOEFL Certification ($n = 1$)	61–100	1	

Note. $n = 74$