An Integrated Conceptual Framework for Understanding Learners Experiences in Japanese Language Learning: Bridging Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Miao Wujun[1], Norwaliza Abdul Wahab[2]*

Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Azlan Shah Campus, Sultan Idris Education University, Proton City 35900, Perak, Malaysia

*Correspondence Author

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework for understanding learners' experiences in Japanese language learning by bridging Adler's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory and Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model. While existing research in Japanese language education has extensively examined linguistic challenges, motivation, and pedagogical practices, these dimensions are often treated in isolation, resulting in a fragmented understanding of learners' developmental trajectories. Positioned as a conceptual article, this study does not report empirical data but instead advances theoretical clarification. It argues that language learning, particularly in culturally dense contexts such as Japanese, is best understood as an intercultural, emotional, and identity-related process rather than a purely technical acquisition. Adler's framework contributes a developmental lens that illuminates psychological transformation, disorientation, and identity negotiation, while Byram's model specifies the architecture of intercultural capabilities including attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness. By integrating these perspectives, the paper reconceptualises learner challenges not as deficits but as meaningful stages of intercultural becoming. The resulting framework offers a coherent theoretical lens for future research design, interpretation, and pedagogical reflection in Japanese language education and other interculturally embedded language learning contexts. The contribution of this article lies in conceptual synthesis rather than empirical generalisation, providing a theoretically defensible foundation for understanding language learning as an intercultural developmental process.

Keywords: Japanese language learning; intercultural communicative competence; cross-cultural adaptation; learner identity; conceptual framework; intercultural development; language education theory

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning in contemporary higher education is increasingly recognised as a complex intercultural endeavour rather than a purely linguistic exercise. In the case of Japanese language learning, this complexity is particularly salient. Learners are required to navigate a communicative system deeply shaped by sociocultural values such as hierarchy, relational sensitivity, indirectness, and contextualised meaning-making. These characteristics demand not only grammatical competence but also cultural interpretation, emotional regulation, and identity negotiation. Recent reviews of Japanese language education in Mainland China show that pedagogical diversification, including flipped classrooms, CALL, and intelligent systems, which co-occurs with enduring motivational and intercultural challenges that are not fully explained by traditional linguistic paradigms alone, highlighting the need for more integrative theoretical lenses (Miao & Abdul Wahab, 2025).

Additionally, a growing body of international scholarship has demonstrated that language learning experiences are inseparable from processes of identity construction, emotional engagement, and intercultural becoming (Rajadurai, 2010; de Beaufort, 2021; Cai et al., 2022; Bara, 2025). Research on learner identity consistently shows that language learners are not simply acquiring skills but are negotiating their sense of self, legitimacy,

and belonging within imagined and real intercultural communities (Piasecka, 2019; Abdul Halim et al., 2025). In interculturally demanding contexts such as Japanese language learning, learners frequently report confusion over pragmatic norms, emotional discomfort in interaction, and tensions surrounding authenticity of self-expression (Mohd et al., 2020; Ishiki, 2013; Zheng, 2023). However, existing literature often treats linguistic, emotional, and cultural dimensions in isolation. Studies on motivation, anxiety, pragmatics, or cultural awareness tend to operate within separate theoretical silos. What remains underdeveloped is a coherent conceptual explanation of how these dimensions interrelate over time within the learner's developmental trajectory.

Two theoretical traditions offer particularly powerful lenses for addressing this gap: Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Adler, 1975; Kim, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) and Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Liddicoat, 2019). Although both frameworks have been widely applied in language education research, they are rarely brought into sustained conceptual dialogue. This paper argues that an integration of these two perspectives provides a more theoretically robust foundation for understanding learners' experiences in Japanese language learning. This article is positioned explicitly as a conceptual paper. Its aim is not to report empirical findings but to provide a theoretically grounded justification for combining cross-cultural adaptation theory with intercultural communicative competence, and to propose an integrated framework capable of guiding future research and pedagogical thinking in Japanese language education and intercultural learning more broadly.

Problematizing Existing Approaches

Much research in Japanese language education has historically been shaped by pedagogical paradigms that prioritise grammatical accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and test performance (Kubota, 2017; Gao & Lv, 2018; Teo et al., 2019). While such studies contribute valuable instructional insight, they often fail to capture the lived complexity of learners' experiences.

Pragmatics research illustrates this limitation clearly. Mohd et al. (2020), for example, demonstrated that even when learners possess knowledge of appropriate Japanese expressions, pragmatic transfer from the first language can lead to miscommunication and sociocultural awkwardness. Similarly, Ishihara (2007) showed that pragmatic competence requires explicit awareness of cultural norms rather than mere linguistic mastery. These findings suggest that communication breakdowns in Japanese learning are often cultural rather than grammatical.

Moreover, identity and emotional dimensions remain under-theorised. Studies across different contexts consistently demonstrate that learners experience anxiety, self-doubt, identity conflict, and legitimacy struggle when engaging in intercultural communication (Rajadurai, 2010; Piasecka, 2019; Zheng, 2023). From a critical perspective, Kubota (2018) argues that mainstream SLA research has historically marginalised issues of power, identity, and subjectivity, thereby producing incomplete accounts of language learning.

If language learning is understood as a process involving identity transformation, emotional struggle, and intercultural positioning, then it requires theoretical frameworks capable of explaining development holistically rather than fragmentarily. This is precisely where Adler's and Byram's models become conceptually productive.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation And Transformative Learning

Adler's (1975) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory conceptualises intercultural engagement not as linear adjustment to external norms, but as a process of psychological and epistemic transformation. The stages of contact, disintegration, autonomy, and independence capture the destabilisation of self-understanding that occurs when individuals encounter sustained cultural difference. Crucially, Adler frames adaptation not as successful assimilation, but as the development of a more complex, reflexive, and plural sense of self. This framing is particularly relevant for language learning, where learners are repeatedly required to confront unfamiliar communicative norms, symbolic meanings, and social expectations.

While adaptation theory was originally developed in the context of cross-cultural relocation, contemporary scholarship has increasingly extended its relevance to symbolic and educational intercultural contexts. Pacheco (2020) argues that globalised communication environments, including digital media and sustained foreign

language learning, can generate experiences analogous to culture shock, characterised by epistemic uncertainty and identity destabilisation. Zheng's (2023) ethnographic work on Chinese international postgraduate students further demonstrates that emotional regulation and identity negotiation are not peripheral outcomes but central mechanisms through which intercultural competence develops. Sjøen's (2023) study similarly conceptualises emotions as mediating forces that shape learners' capacity to interpret, respond to, and grow through intercultural encounters. These studies collectively support a shift from viewing adaptation as a situational challenge toward understanding it as a developmental process embedded in learning itself.

Within Japanese language learning contexts, the explanatory power of adaptation theory becomes particularly evident. Learners frequently report initial idealisation of Japanese culture, followed by confusion and frustration when encountering indirect communication, hierarchical positioning, and pragmatic ambiguity (Ishiki, 2013; Okumura, 2024). Such experiences are often misinterpreted within pedagogical discourse as motivation problems or affective barriers. From an adaptation perspective, however, these experiences can be theorised as moments of disintegration that create the conditions for deeper reflexivity and intercultural growth. In this sense, emotional discomfort is not a deficit but a developmental resource.

At the same time, adaptation theory also presents conceptual limitations for language education research. While it provides a compelling account of how learners change psychologically, it offers limited insight into what specific communicative capacities learners develop through this process. The theory therefore risks remaining descriptively powerful but pedagogically under-specified. This limitation points toward the necessity of integrating a complementary framework capable of articulating the architecture of intercultural competence.

Intercultural Communicative Competence As Architecture Of Capability

Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) remains one of the most influential frameworks for conceptualising intercultural development within language education. Unlike general psychological theories of adaptation, Byram's model is explicitly pedagogical in orientation. It articulates five interrelated dimensions, such as attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. All five dimensions specify the capacities required for meaningful engagement across cultural differences. The strength of this framework lies in its ability to operationalise intercultural development in ways that are relevant to curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy.

Subsequent scholarship has reinforced both the relevance and flexibility of this model. Feng et al. (2025), for instance, demonstrate empirically that Byram's components resonate strongly with the lived experiences of Chinese university students negotiating intercultural communication. Liddicoat (2019, 2022) further extends Byram's work by emphasising that intercultural language learning is fundamentally reflective and interpretive, involving meaning-making rather than the acquisition of static skills. Deardorff's (2006) process-oriented model similarly conceptualises intercultural competence as developmental and recursive, rather than as a fixed set of outcomes. Together, these works support a view of competence as dynamic, contextual, and continuously negotiated.

Nevertheless, ICC frameworks have also been subject to sustained critique. Kubota (2018) cautions that competence models may become overly normative, implicitly promoting idealised versions of the "interculturally competent subject" while neglecting the emotional labour, power relations, and identity struggles involved in becoming such a subject. Detached from a theory of subjectivity and transformation, ICC risks functioning as a descriptive checklist of desirable attributes rather than as an explanatory theory of development. This critique is particularly salient in contexts such as Japanese language learning, where learners' struggles are shaped not only by knowledge gaps but also by symbolic power, legitimacy, and cultural positioning.

These limitations suggest that while ICC provides a strong account of what learners are developing toward, it does not sufficiently explain how learners move through difficulty, instability, and transformation in order to develop such capacities. It is precisely this gap that cross-cultural adaptation theory helps to address, thereby making the integration of the two frameworks both theoretically justified and conceptually productive.

Why Integration Is Conceptually Necessary

The integration of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is not merely additive theoretical exercise but a response to persistent conceptual limitations within language education research. When employed independently, both frameworks illuminate important dimensions of intercultural learning yet remain theoretically incomplete. Each addresses a different analytical layer of the learning process: adaptation theories foreground psychological transformation and identity development, whereas competence models articulate the structure of communicative capability. Without integration, neither framework alone is sufficient to account for the complexity of intercultural language learning.

Adler's (1975) model offers a compelling account of how learners experience instability, identity disruption, and reflexive reconstruction during sustained engagement with cultural difference. Its relevance has been extended beyond migration contexts to educational and language learning settings (Pacheco, 2020; Hernández López, 2021; King et al., 2021). Studies situated in Japanese-related contexts similarly document learner trajectories characterised by fascination, frustration, emotional struggle, and gradual reorientation toward more flexible intercultural identities (Xu, 2020; Nurjaleka, 2022; Okumura, 2024). However, while adaptation theory explains how learners change, it provides limited conceptual specificity regarding what communicative capacities emerge through such transformation. As Hoff (2020) observes, psychological models of intercultural development often lack pedagogical articulation, constraining their explanatory power for language education research.

In contrast, Byram's (1997) ICC model offers one of the most systematic articulations of intercultural capability within language education through its emphasis on attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness. Its relevance has been widely supported across contexts (Deardorff, 2006; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Feng et al., 2025). At the same time, ICC frameworks have been criticised for becoming overly normative, implicitly presenting competence as an idealised endpoint while under-theorising the emotional labour, identity struggle, and epistemic disruption involved in its development (Kubota, 2018; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Detached from a developmental account of subjectivity, ICC risks functioning as a descriptive checklist of outcomes rather than as a genuinely explanatory theory of learner development.

It is at this theoretical impasse that integration becomes conceptually necessary. Adler's framework contributes the processual depth required to theorise learners' movement through instability and transformation, while Byram's model anchors this developmental process in identifiable communicative capacities. Importantly, however, the two frameworks are not fully harmonious. Adler's theory implies open-ended identity becoming and emphasises the unpredictability of developmental trajectories, whereas Byram's model reflects pedagogical directionality and a more normative conception of competence. This theoretical tension is not treated as a problem to be resolved but as a productive space for conceptual advancement. The framework proposed in this study deliberately holds this tension, acknowledging that intercultural development in language learning is simultaneously emergent and educationally scaffolded.

This integrative positioning is further supported by sociocultural perspectives that conceptualise language learning as symbolic, relational, and identity-laden (Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2013). Empirical studies increasingly demonstrate that intercultural development involves ongoing negotiation of selfhood rather than linear accumulation of skills (Cai et al., 2022; Bara, 2025; Abdul Halim et al., 2025). From this perspective, learner difficulty itself can be reconceptualised: emotional discomfort and confusion are not pedagogical failures but developmentally productive conditions through which deeper intercultural competencies emerge (Zheng, 2023; Sjøen, 2023). Language learning, particularly in culturally embedded contexts such as Japanese, is therefore more appropriately understood as an ongoing process of intercultural becoming rather than as technical acquisition alone (Nurjaleka, 2022; Okumura, 2024; Feng et al., 2025).

The Integrated Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the integrated conceptual framework that theorises learners' experiences in Japanese language learning as a dynamic developmental process shaped by the interaction between cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Rather than positioning Adler's (1975) and Byram's (1997) models as parallel explanatory systems, the framework conceptualises them as operating at different but

interconnected analytical levels: adaptation explains how learners experience developmental change, while ICC specifies what capacities emerge through that change.
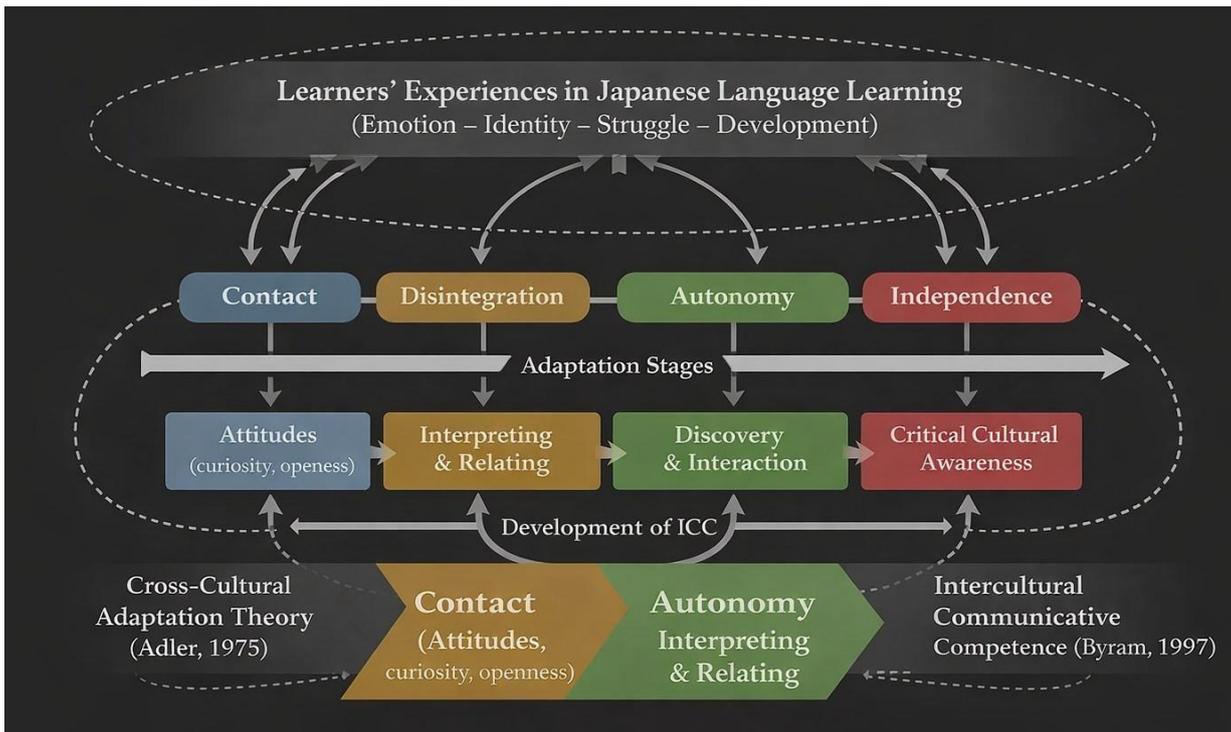

Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework for Understanding Learners Experiences in Japanese Languange Learning

At the top of the model, learners' experiences are foregrounded as the central phenomenon of inquiry. These experiences encompass emotional responses, identity negotiation, struggle, and developmental change, emphasising that language learning is not merely technical acquisition but an affective and intercultural process. The middle layer represents Adler's cross-cultural adaptation trajectory, conceptualised as a developmental continuum consisting of contact, disintegration, autonomy, and independence. These stages are not treated as fixed or linear phases but as recurring orientations through which learners interpret intercultural encounters. Movement across these stages reflects shifts in emotional positioning, self-understanding, and engagement with cultural differences.

The lower layer operationalises Byram's ICC dimensions as capacities that are progressively activated and reshaped through the adaptation process. Specifically, the framework proposes a conceptual mapping between developmental stages and emerging competencies. The contact stage is associated with the emergence of intercultural attitudes such as curiosity and openness. As learners enter disintegration, experiences of confusion and discomfort create conditions for the development of skills of interpreting and relating, as learners begin to recognise and reflect upon cultural difference. Movement toward autonomy supports the development of skills of discovery and interaction, whereby learners actively negotiate meaning and adjust communicative behaviour. Independence corresponds with the development of critical cultural awareness, enabling learners to evaluate cultural practices reflexively, including both target and home cultural norms.

Importantly, the arrows in the model indicate that this process is not linear but recursive. Learners may move back and forth between stages, and different ICC dimensions may develop unevenly. Emotional struggle and competence development are therefore conceptualised as mutually constitutive rather than sequential outcomes. Through this integration, the framework reconceptualises Japanese language learning as a process of intercultural becoming, where psychological development, identity negotiation, and communicative competence co-evolve over time. The framework thus provides a theoretically grounded lens for future empirical research seeking to analyse learner narratives, developmental trajectories, and pedagogical practices within interculturally embedded language learning contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

This conceptual integration contributes to the field in three interrelated and theoretically significant ways. First, it addresses the persistent fragmentation in language education research by offering an integrative architecture that connects affect, identity, culture, and competence. Much existing scholarship continues to treat constructs such as motivation, anxiety, pragmatics, identity, and intercultural competence as analytically separable domains (Kubota, 2018). While ICC models such as Byram's (1997) and Deardorff's (2006) provide rich descriptions of intercultural capacities, they have been critiqued for insufficiently theorising the lived emotional and developmental processes through which such capacities emerge (Liddicoat, 2019; Hoff, 2020). Conversely, psychological and developmental models of adaptation (e.g., Adler, 1975; Kim, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) offer powerful accounts of transformation and subjectivity yet often lack pedagogical specificity regarding communicative practice. By integrating these traditions, the framework moves beyond parallel theorisation and instead offers a coherent explanatory structure in which emotional experience, identity negotiation, and competence development are understood as mutually constitutive. This responds directly to scholarly calls for more theoretically coherent and less compartmentalised approaches to language education (Kubota, 2018; Liddicoat, 2019).

Second, the framework offers a critical reconceptualisation of learner struggle by contrasting deficitoriented interpretations with a developmental perspective. In much pedagogical discourse, anxiety, confusion, and instability are framed as obstacles to be minimised (Piasecka, 2019; Rajadurai, 2010). However, research on emotional and identity dimensions of intercultural learning increasingly suggests that discomfort and tension are not peripheral but central to development (Zheng, 2023; Sjøen, 2023). Adler's (1975) concept of disintegration, when read alongside Byram's (1997) emphasis on interpreting, relating, and critical cultural awareness, allows learner struggle to be theorised as a productive epistemic condition rather than a pedagogical failure. In contrast to competence models that risk portraying development as linear progression toward an idealised endpoint (Kubota, 2018), the integrated framework foregrounds instability, reflexivity, and transformation as intrinsic to intercultural becoming. This perspective aligns more closely with contemporary sociocultural theories of language learning that conceptualise development as non-linear, negotiated, and deeply entangled with identity (Cai et al., 2022; Bara, 2025; Abdul Halim et al., 2025).

Third, while grounded in Japanese language learning, the framework offers conceptual transferability beyond this specific context. Japanese language learning is particularly suitable for theorising intercultural development due to its strong cultural embeddedness, complex pragmatic norms, and identity demands (Mohd et al., 2020; Ishiki, 2013; Okumura, 2024). However, the theoretical logic of the framework is not culturally bound to Japanese alone. Similar dynamics of emotional disruption, identity negotiation, and intercultural positioning have been documented in study abroad contexts (Cai et al., 2022; Abdul Halim et al., 2025), multilingual identity development (Bara, 2025), and transnational learning spaces (Rajadurai, 2010). This suggests that the framework possesses not only contextual relevance but also theoretical generalisability. Its contribution therefore lies not in offering a model exclusively for Japanese education, but in proposing a conceptual lens applicable to interculturally dense language learning contexts more broadly.

CONCLUSION

This article has proposed a theoretically grounded integration of cross-cultural adaptation theory and intercultural communicative competence as a conceptual framework for understanding learners' experiences in Japanese language learning. By bringing together Adler's process-oriented view of psychological and identity transformation with Byram's structured account of intercultural capability, the framework reconceptualises language learning as an emotional, intercultural, and developmental process rather than a purely technical endeavour.

The contribution of this paper lies in conceptual clarification and theoretical synthesis rather than empirical generalisation. It offers a coherent lens through which future studies may design research questions, interpret learner narratives, and analyse developmental trajectories in more holistic ways. In particular, the framework invites researchers to move beyond fragmented treatments of motivation, anxiety, pragmatics, or competence, and instead to examine how these dimensions interact dynamically within learners lived experiences.

Pedagogically, the framework also encourages educators to recognise learner struggle, uncertainty, and identity negotiation as meaningful dimensions of learning rather than as deficiencies to be eliminated. By foregrounding intercultural becoming the central process of language education, this conceptual work contributes to broader debates about the aims of foreign language education in an increasingly intercultural and globalised world.

Limitations of the Conceptual Framework

As a conceptual contribution, the framework proposed in this article is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the model is theoretically constructed and has not yet been empirically validated. While it is grounded in established theories and supported by relevant literature, future empirical studies are required to examine how the proposed relationships between adaptation stages and ICC dimensions manifest in actual learner experiences. Second, the framework necessarily involves a degree of theoretical abstraction. The mapping between Adler's stages and Byram's dimensions is intended as an analytical heuristic rather than a deterministic developmental sequence. Learners' trajectories are likely to be non-linear, context-dependent, and shaped by individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors that cannot be fully captured within a single conceptual model.

Third, although the framework is developed in relation to Japanese language learning, its conceptual transferability to other linguistic and cultural contexts should be approached cautiously. Japanese learning environments are characterised by particular sociocultural features (e.g., hierarchical norms, indirect communication, pragmatic density) that may intensify intercultural experiences. Application of the framework to other contexts therefore requires contextual sensitivity rather than direct theoretical transplantation. Finally, by foregrounding emotional struggle, identity negotiation, and intercultural becoming, the framework risks underrepresenting structural and institutional dimensions of language education such as curriculum constraints, assessment regimes, and power relations embedded within educational systems. These dimensions warrant further theoretical integration in future work. Despite these limitations, the framework offers a theoretically coherent starting point for rethinking language learning as an intercultural developmental process and provides a foundation for future empirical refinement.

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Competing Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data Availability

No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is therefore not applicable.

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