

*Internships in French-speaking Environments:  
First steps of a Thai university*

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**Abstract**

Internships in French-speaking environments are transformational learning opportunities (TLO) that often contribute to enrich and broaden student learning and personal development.

In a Thailand-centric context where the learning of French is losing momentum, it has become necessary over recent years to implement various tools to encourage our learners. Three different internships programs were implemented to develop cross-cultural sensibilities, to increase students' self-confidence, to improve their language skills, and to prepare them for a professional life open to the world.

The aim of this article is to share our experience regarding internships developed with French and Swiss institutions, and the steps we took to both implement and improve them. In the first part of the article, we will introduce the context of our study.

Then, our three main internship programs will be described: one-month internships in French and Swiss companies based in Thailand, three-month internships in France as well as export mission projects and we will explain the obstacles we encountered, and the solutions implemented.

Finally, we will demonstrate how these programs have had positive effects on our students.

Keywords: internships, internship abroad, internships in France, language study, TLO

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## **Introduction**

Since the new millennium, tertiary education has become more global through study abroad programs, universities exchanges, offshore satellite campuses, and international internships. The number of foreign tertiary students worldwide has increased significantly. A study published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015, p.352-369) shows that, between 2005 and 2012, this number increased by 50%. Concurrently, international exchange programs and internships abroad have continued to expand. As Bian (2013, p.451) noted, " for a student, the principal purpose of mobility is to enrich one's knowledge, broaden one's worldview and prepare for a future professional life." Furthermore, with these experiences abroad, the majority of students will further develop their language skills.

In this article, we will share our experience regarding three different internship programs initially for bachelor's degree students minoring in French. In the first part, we will introduce the context of our study. Then, we will describe the three main programs: One-month internships in French and Swiss companies based in Thailand, three-month internships in France, and Franco-Thai export projects. Obstacles and solutions will be discussed for each programs. In a third part, we will attempt to demonstrate how these programs have had positive effects on our students and on our institution.

### **1.The context: proposing internships in French-speaking environments**

#### **1.1. French language in Thailand**

Just before the Second World War, the teaching of French rose to a position of preeminence in Thailand. Boontham (1976) explains that, thanks to the francophilia of the Thai royal family, French was still being developed at schools and universities from 1950 onward. Until the National Education Act in 1999, Tantiratanavong (2007) points out that French was the first optional foreign language taught in high schools. Today, schools have more autonomy to choose which languages they make available. As a consequence, the diversity of languages on offer increased. Chinese has become the most common foreign language taught after English. Japanese courses, also popular with young people, are present in all universities in Thailand. Meanwhile, German and more recently Spanish stand as additional options for high school and university students. As a result, French no longer retains the cachet which it formerly possessed 20 years ago. According to data from the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, the number of learners in high schools and universities were estimated at 35,000 persons learning French in 2015 versus 55,000 in 2004 (- 36%). In a country where the French language is in decline, it was crucial to develop various programs adapted to a new environment.

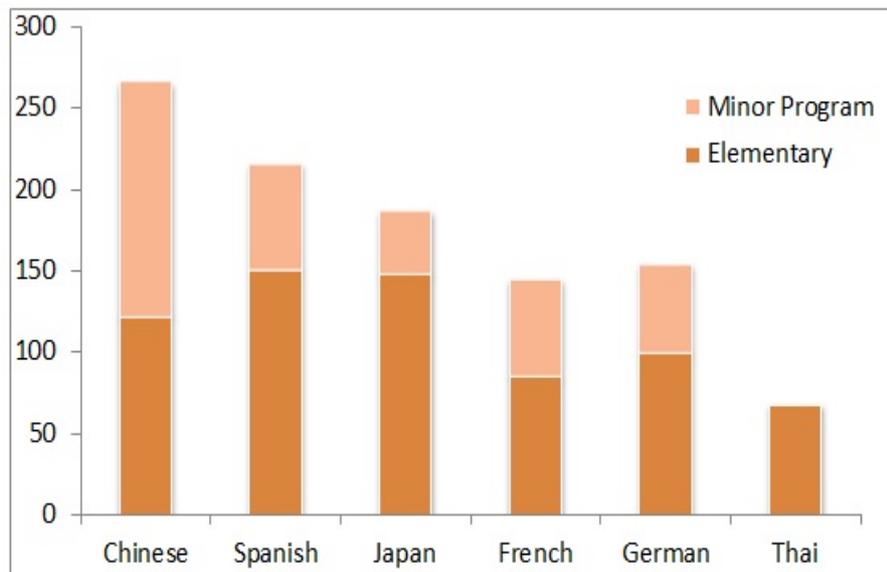
#### **1.2. The first tools developed to promote French at Mahidol University**

Founded in 1986, in Thailand, Mahidol University International College (MUIC) offers Bachelor's degree to more than 3,700 students of whom 20% are foreigners. In its mission statement, MUIC aims to prepare global citizens for the 21st century, fostering in them the ability to transform knowledge into action and to make

meaningful contributions to society (see website in references). In order to promote a global citizenry, the college has implemented active exchange agreements with over 100 universities in America, Europe, Oceania and Asia.

Upon entry, students also have the opportunity to commence the study of a second foreign language (Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, German, French or Thai). Two consecutive courses of 40 hours must be taken. After completing a basic curriculum of 120 hours for one academic year, more motivated students can further pursue language minor program via eight 40-hour courses (320 hours total).

This chart shows that French is not the most commonly chosen second foreign language in our college. However, its minor program remains stable.



Number of students per language at MUIC: Average on 3 trimesters(2014-2015).  
Data provided by the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA). Oct. 2015.

In a context where French language is declining, and in the specific environment of our International College (with a large number of languages being taught and concurrent development of new minors), it has become necessary over recent years to implement various tools to encourage our learners. We will briefly present the first tools we developed before focusing on internships.

### **Tool n°1: A summer language trip in Nice**

MUIC French section, in cooperation with the University of Nice, has organized an 80-hour intensive French course every August since 2003. This one-month study abroad trip aims to increase students' language skills and to give them a better understanding of some French socio-cultural realities. This summer trip, which for 70% of our students (who range in age from 17 to 21) is their first experience abroad without a parent or a relative, is a true first step towards personal autonomy, which in human terms represents without a doubt the most valuable reward to be reaped from a first trip abroad. For the French section of our college, this summer trip would prove to be a crucial factor encouraging students to continue learning French. From 2003 to 2013, among the 152 elementary students who registered for the French Minor, 67

had previously taken the language summer course in Nice, representing 44% of the French Minor Program. Moreover, we observed that in this group of 67 students, 54 finished the program of 8 courses and passed the DELF B1, a diploma testing French-language abilities for non-native speakers. The withdrawal rate of the minor program was quite low (19%). During the same time period, 85 students registered without taking the summer course but only 54 completed the program and succeeded the B1 exam. In this second case, the withdrawal rate is higher (36%). However, we must be careful with figures: it is obviously difficult to measure the importance of this language and culture summer course as it pertains to the motivation of our students, we remain convinced that this summer program is a good tool to encourage our learners and to promote French in our college.

### **Tool n°2: University exchange programs in France**

From 2008 onward, our college started to sign three-year MOU with French higher education establishments "Grandes Écoles" which, in many aspects, share similarities with our college. A first agreement was signed with a business school in Marseille, and so far, 9 Thai students benefited from this three-month exchange. Two agreements were just signed with Business schools in Dijon Burgundy and in Bordeaux. Since 2008, our students in biology and food sciences have had the opportunity to go to the School of Industrial Biology or EBI in Cergy-Pontoise, near Paris. Even though we only had few scientific students in the French program at that time, two of them went to study at EBI for six months in 2009-10, and one studied for a full academic year in 2012-13. This exchange is a challenge insofar as, unlike business schools, the language of instruction is French.

The university exchange is undeniably valuable for students; they contribute significantly to students' personal and professional development. However, it was necessary for us to offer other options for students who cannot go to the summer trip or to the university exchanges.

### **1.3. Why offer internships in French-speaking environments?**

Our college did not succeed in developing relations with French universities in the fields of Tourism and Hospitality Management (THM) and social sciences. For our Thai students minoring in French, we first proposed one-month summer internships in French companies based in Thailand. As fourth year THM students were required to do a three-month internship, we decided to look for hotels in France. Initially, the objective was to increase student's motivation, and to show that French language could be useful outside the classroom. Every year since 2011, two THM students minoring in French do their three-month internships in two hotels in Bordeaux. Later, two Thai students succeed in developing a new type of internship: the export project. In this qualitative study, we will attempt to demonstrate how these programs have had a positive effect for our students.

### **1.4. Qualitative survey**

Beginning 2012, we started to interview students regarding their opinions about the internships programs. The objectives of this qualitative survey were to both evaluate students' levels of satisfaction and to identify possible problems in the various

programs. Students were interviewed for 30 minutes and were requested to answer 20 to 35 questions divided in four parts:

- a. Students' profile.
- b. Their situation prior to the internship (i.e., decision process and preparation).
- c. The internship itself (arrival, accommodation, internship, workplace and mission, life in the city, cultural adaptation, personal likes and dislikes).
- d. The result of the internship (personal experiences with culture and language, their motivation in learning French, professional perspectives, others).

10 students responded to a questionnaire about the one-month domestic internship in French-speaking companies (N1), 10 students answered a questionnaire regarding internship in a French hotel (N2), and 2 students participated in the interview for the Franco-Thai export project (N3). The results of these interviews are presented in sections 2 and 3 of this article.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to these qualitative interviews. The sample' sizes (N1=10, N2=10, N3=2) are small, and do not pretend to be representative of any larger population. We are compelled to add that the majority of the interviews were organized within a month after students returned to the college, and that in the immediate aftermath of their time abroad, some students may still have been over-enthusiastic about their experiences and linguistic progress. Additionally, even though students were given precisely formulated questionnaires, their answers could have been unconsciously influenced by the interviewer who was their French language instructor. Finally, the author of this study is perfectly aware that students' intrinsic motivation cannot be fully measured in such a short period of time.

## **2. The progressive implementation of internship programs**

In this part, we will describe the three main internship programs implemented for our undergraduate students. For each of them, we will mention the obstacles encountered, the solutions implemented, and the perspectives of development.

### **2.1. One-month internships in French or Swiss companies based in Thailand**

For financial reasons, most of our undergraduates minoring in French could not attend the one-month summer course on the French Riviera without a scholarship. Moreover, as our university had only developed exchange agreements with business and engineering schools, no possibility were offered for students in social sciences or hospitality management. Finally, when we taught students how to write a résumé (C.V) and a letter of motivation, we soon realized that most of them did not have any working experiences. Internships appeared as a solution to that problem.

In 2007, we encouraged students to do a one-month internship during summer. Two French-speaking embassies, a Francophone cultural center, an Internet newspaper based in Bangkok, a Swiss multinational company and a French bakery were the first internships' experiences for our students and our long-time partners.

Our survey showed that the students were satisfied by these first working experiences which sometimes helped to choose their career choices. They had the opportunity to learn a company culture and to improve their language skills, both in French and in English. Moreover, by leaving their "comfort zone", they gained confidence.

However, all was not perfect. We encountered problems with two students: the tasks given to them were not clear at all, causing one to work without energy while the other felt useless, unable to contribute.

During these first two years, we worked very informally, but it became necessary to prepare and manage the internships more formally. In 2009, we wrote an internship agreement with precise information mentioning the name of the supervisor, the aim of the internship, its description, the conditions and evaluation items. In collaboration with the company and the intern, we created questionnaires. Finally, we had at least one contact with the supervisor and the student during the internship. Thanks to these agreements, students obtained more interesting missions, and were much more motivated.

These short-term internships in French-speaking environment, which for 70% of our students were their first working experience, can be considered a first true step in the professional world. Moreover, the young interns got to be in contact with people from a different culture and had the opportunity to practice French.

## **2.2. Three-month internships in France for THM students**

For students majoring in Tourism & Hospitality Management (THM), we first tried to develop exchange agreements with French-speaking universities. In France, the programs proposed by the "écoles hôtelières" are very different from those at MUIC. Furthermore, language was a barrier for both partners. The attempts we made in Switzerland were not successful, mainly because large hotel schools had already developed their networks. As fourth year THM students are required to do a three-month internship, we decided to look for hotels in France. "The purpose of international internships is to give students an opportunity to gain work knowledge, to be exposed to an international organization's operations, and to experience acculturation through sufficient time in country." (Furnham & Bockner, 1986). The opportunity to do an internship in France sharply increased students' motivation, as they quickly understood its value in terms of leveraging themselves on the international marketplace.

In September 2010, we signed our first agreement with a hotel in Bordeaux: two Thai students did a three-month internship in January 2011. A year later, an agreement was signed with a hotel in Arcachon: a bathing resort at 60km of Bordeaux.. They first prepared a French résumé ("curriculum vitae"), with a stated professional objective, and a letter of motivation, and they took the DELF B1 examination (see p.4) prior to their departure for France. To assist the students in their preparation, we designed an online course focusing on hotel and restaurant management. We also used different textbooks on French for Specific Purposes (FSP) including "hôtellerie-restauration.com" (Corbeau, et al., 2006).

A year later, we modified the first online version following the discussions with one hotel manager who made helpful suggestions to improve the course.

The administrative element of internships is consistently time consuming for teachers and students. We have to prepare administrative documents, including internship agreements ("convention de stage") signed by five different parties, which are required for obtaining a French visa. Experience taught us that it was necessary to delegate a maximum number of these duties to students who generally go to France in pairs.

Since 2011, the two hotels have received ten students from our college for three-month internships. Students were all the more motivated by the fact that their tasks were varied (reception, restaurant, kitchen, and household), and that they felt like useful members of the hotel staff, thanks to their level of language skills (in this context, English and in some cases Mandarin). Additionally, they received a compensation of 537 € per month (in 2015), and are housed and fed by the hotel.

So far, the internship program we have initiated with the two French hotels has been quite satisfactory. It seems that Tourism & Hospitality students gained in personal maturity and professionalism, as well as saw improvements in their spoken and written French. They definitely felt more confident with oral communication, and perceived the experience as advantageous in terms of seeking future employment.

Our survey indicates that seven students were very satisfied by their internship and their experience in France. Two students were a bit disappointed and have said that the work was too demanding and that the atmosphere was not nice. The first student did not like to work in the kitchen because of the stress.. The second one could not fit in the new environment she was confronted neither: she had an argument with an employee in the household department which led to her not being able to integrate herself during all the internship. The tenth student had a very poor attitude during the internship, and was not efficient at all; the supervisor was quite upset. Even though this first professional internship was a failure both for the student and for the hotel, the student got to better understand what he really likes and wants to do.

Most of these students have now found their first employment in international companies based in Thailand.

Knowing that an international internship experience can be a plus in a challenging and competitive job market, business students minoring in French asked us to help them to find internships in France. We had to develop new projects for the future.

### **2.3. Franco-Thai Export Missions**

This third tool was not initiated by the French section, but by a student who just graduated from Mahidol university, and who was studying computer networking & telecommunication (2013-2015) at "l'École d'Ingénieurs en Génie Électrique et Informatique" or ESIEE in Amiens. Two years prior, this student had done a first internship at the Franco-Thai chamber of Commerce, and had developed connections with Thai companies. During his two-year master degree, he met a French businessman who had a medium-size company specialized in industrial robotics. He

proposed to find Thai manufacturers for integrated circuits for the production of industrial assembly lines. He found a Thai company able to provide quality integrated circuits for the French business. His engineering knowledge and language skills, both in French and Thai, made him a key-partner in this venture. The fact that he was remunerated by the French side gave him confidence and motivation.

This student later presented his experience to the AIESEC Thailand (see references), and he then advised other students who had similar projects.

In 2014, a second student worked on an export mission just after her study exchange program in Marseille. She was working for a company looking for new natural compounds in the Thai cosmetic industry. Her mission was to identify potential suppliers on the French market, and to prepare a trip for two businesswomen. She first found two French companies, and later organized a business trip for the Thai buyers. As of right now, we do not know whether a deal was concluded, but our student had great enthusiasm for this project in which she used her common sense, her business knowledge and her language skills.

Without being aware of it themselves, these two "pioneers" have found a new way to develop internships. In both cases, they were studying in a university before getting into very active internships. They were very mature and already had an entrepreneurial attitude. The first student had his accommodation, his permit of residence and had an office in the French company. The second student, based in Marseille, was helped by the "AIESEC Marseille". She was able to start her one-month mission in the AIESEC office, which helped her to find a room in Marseille at a reasonable price.

The Franco-Thai export projects must be prepared long in advance. As soon as the student knows in which business school he plans to study, he can contact the Franco-Thai Chamber of Commerce and the Business France to get more information about the regional market. These two students gave us the idea to develop in cooperation with the International Relation Office and the Business Administration Division a package Study & Internship program.

## 2.4. Obstacles and solutions

One-month internships in Thailand	
1.- Most of the time, students don't have professional experiences, and they often lack maturity.	1.- Organize sessions to explain the benefits of internships in a French-speaking company. Give tips to write a CV and a cover letter. Select the most motivated students.
2.- Internship's mission and tasks are often not clear for students who lose motivation.	2.- Write an Internship agreement.
3.- Administrating internships is time consuming for educators.	3.- The administrative part must be shared. It must be recognized as an academic service.
Three-month internships in France	
4.- The administrative side of an international internship is time consuming for the educators	4.- Delegate a maximum of duties to students and organize a meeting with all the parties within your institution to facilitate the process
5.- "Vous parlez français ?" The intern must speak French, and work in a French environment. The first month is going to be a bit difficult.	5.- The student must take the DELF B1. S/he must take FSP 40-h for hotel & restaurant and must have basic on French culture on the workplace.
6.- Sometime, students are not motivated or are not able to adapt to their new environment.	6.- Select students very carefully with THM and BBA instructors. Make sure that they had good attitudes in previous internships. Organize meeting with former interns.
Franco-Thai export missions	
7.- Export missions are too difficult project for students. The timing is too short.	7.- It must be prepared at least six months in advance. Students can be advised by former students, teachers, chambers of commerce, association.
8.- Logistics can be time consuming for the student: Visa, accomodation, office, etc.	8.- A study abroad + internship offers a solution For accomodation and office space, students' association can help.

## 3. Internships in French-speaking environment: three main benefits

"College students are entering a world where understanding and navigating linguistic and cultural differences are essential. International experience can make students more attractive candidates for hiring" Gates (2014, p.33). This quotation mentions the three main benefits of our internships.

### 3.1. Personal development and cultural benefits

The majority of students identified the internships as greatly beneficial in expanding their cultural knowledge and in contributing to their personal growth and maturity. One student explained that this experience gave him a closer look at cultural differences between France and Thailand. He added that working in a French hotel for three months gave him a better understanding of the French.

Another student wanted to take her internship in France, but she was very afraid to leave Thailand alone. However, after the three-month internship, she was very proud to have discovered the world by herself, even though the first month had been a bit difficult.

Thanks to internships abroad, students acquire soft skills (Crossman, J.E., Clarke, M., 2009) that will contribute to their employability. These soft skills include cultural understandings, empathy, tolerance, respect, humanity. More commonly, international experiences are connected with open-mindedness. Our students are aware that these

soft skills have been acquired at the workplace while they were communicating in French.

### **3.2. Progress in French**

For the interviewees, who did a one-month internship in French and Swiss companies in Thailand, we cannot say that their progress in French was significant because it was a mild and short immersion, even though most of them had real opportunities to speak in "real life" situation. It was an important first step.

The three-month internship in France can be considered as a real immersion. The 10 interviewees have all confirmed that they were a bit lost at first, but that their levels of comprehension and oral expression improved markedly over the weeks. It is surprising to see the degree to which these students have consolidated their knowledge by practicing French in the workplace. Whereas before leaving, most of them spoke with difficulty and preferred to use English, we observed that they expressed themselves much more easily after their return and that they were speaking of their experiences with enthusiasm. It truly appeared that some students had made much more progress in French outside the classroom than inside it.

Resnick (1987, pp.13-20) was one of the first scholars to analyze the differences between a formal educational system and a more informal system based on the workplace. According to her analysis, there are, at least, four differences. First, practice sessions in school are for the most part individually-centered, while many of the activities outside the classroom are shared socially. Students in a classroom setting are still judged on the basis of individual tasks or tests whereas many activities at work require collaboration; success depends on the collective performance of several individuals. Second, schoolwork emphasizes mental activities, while real-world scenarios often require a blending of mental and physical acumen. Third, according to Resnick, school learning is based on the manipulation of symbols. The world outside school often makes use of objects or events to develop specific skills. Fourth, while school learning aims for the acquisition of general skills and principles, those practicing a language outside of a school develop situation-specific competencies.

Learning a foreign language at the workplace is very often informal. A young person will often learn by observing or listening to those in senior positions. If a supervisor sees that one of his or her subordinates is not able to complete an activity, they will repeat it, or place that individual with a more experienced employee. Our young Thai interns had the opportunity to work with and to learn from different employees at their hotel (including those in reception, restaurant, bar, kitchen, and household areas). The fact that they were part of a team also proved very positive, because although they were not working in the same service during the day, they could still help each other and discuss individual problems with the language and the culture.

### **3.3. Professional benefits**

Today, students are aware that the job market in Thailand is more and more challenging and that an international internship experience will be considered as a plus. They perfectly know that they need more working experiences before entering their professional life or studying at a higher level. These internships in Thailand or in

France clearly show that students begin to learn to engage and to work with people from a different culture. The ones who have been working in France for three months have experienced difficulties and have identified some of their strengths and weaknesses. They were able to adapt quickly to unfamiliar situations. They gained flexibility, open-mindedness, autonomy, and self-confidence.

After these internships in France, most of them had changed. When they came back to the college, they were communicating in French, and they were enthusiastic. They were ready to find employment.

### **Conclusion and perspectives**

The internships in French-speaking environment implemented between MUIC and French and Swiss companies during the last 5 years have had identifiable positive effects on our students: they learned to be more independent, more responsible and became more open to the world. Thanks to these programs, they improved their language skills, they gained international experiences, and found better opportunities on the job market. Moreover, these internships proved to be very valuable to encourage our students to pursue their French language studies.

Internships in French hotels have probably generated the most enthusiasm among learners who understand the benefit of such experiences for their résumé. Students majoring in business or in sciences have shown interest in doing internships in France as well. The Franco-Thai export projects developed by students themselves seem to be a good solution, but need to be improved in the future. A study & internship program including a three-month study in a French business school and a three-month internship in a French company or a three to six-month study in an engineering school and a three-month research internship in a laboratory could be very profitable international program options for students.

Looking towards the future, we hope that these kinds of international programs can also be developed in concert with French partners.

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