Japanese Students' Perceptions of Native English Speakers: Does it and Should it Matter?
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Abstract
This paper explores Japanese EFL students' perceptions of native English speakers and why this is important in English Language Teaching. Since many students' first experience with native English speakers is often with their English teachers, the role of Western teachers as ambassadors for the target culture, and promoters of integrative motivation is examined. The paper then explores the higher purpose of ELT which is to contribute to education for peace by generating cross-cultural goodwill and global solidarity. However, ELT practices that lead to negative perceptions of native English speakers, or create divisiveness between East and West, run contrary to this goal. A small-scale study which investigated Japanese student perceptions of Westerners is described. Results indicate that although perceptions appeared to be positive for the most part, there was a notable sense of separateness which should be addressed in order to generate cross cultural harmony, and achieve the higher purpose of ELT. For the purpose of this discussion, "Us" and “We” refer to native English speakers from Western countries.

Why should we care?
Ambassadors for the target language and culture
It is part of human nature to form impressions about other cultures based on people we meet. Since the first experience many Japanese students have with native English speakers is often with their EFL teachers, we bear the responsibility for creating a good first impression which is likely to last, and influence students' perceptions of so-called “Western culture.” Therefore, it is vital to foster goodwill from the beginning and to be cognizant that students' impressions of us may become generalized not only to all English-speaking countries, but to other Western, non-English speaking countries.

Integrative motivation
Gardner's (1972) Socio-educational model categorizes language-learning motivation as either integrative or instrumental. Integrative motivation is defined as, "a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group" (Gardner & Lambert, p.132), and by Rubrecht (2006) as "a learner's desire to enter into the target language and interact with native speakers" (p.73). Some studies suggest that "integrative and personal reasons for learning
languages (are) preferred over instrumental ones" (Benson, 1991, p.34). Falk (1978) points out that, "students who are most successful when learning a target language are those who like the people that speak the language, admire the culture, and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used" (cited in Norris-Holt, 2001, p.3).

Integrative motivation also encapsulates student attitudes towards the context of language learning. Spolsky (1989) stresses the importance of student attitudes towards both the teacher and the course. Most would agree that positive associations with teachers often translate into positive views of the subjects they teach. Furthermore, Shimizu (1995) points out that, "negative attitudes towards teachers could adversely affect student motivation, not only in the classroom, but also in terms of a student's desire to continue learning the language" (p.2). If our goal is to inspire lifelong language learning, this is an important consideration.

Therefore, it is inherent upon EFL teachers to "Promote integrative values by encouraging a positive and open-minded disposition towards the L2 and its speakers" (Dornyei, 2001).

With this in mind, consider the following excerpt from a Japanese high school English textbook, currently in use, which portrays English dogs as disciplined and restrained, and Japanese dogs as rambunctious and playful. The explanation given for this perceived difference is as follows:

"... (This is) ... due to the great difference in the way the English and the Japanese view relations between humans and animals. The Japanese do not regard domestic animals... as beings that are totally under humankind's rule or obedient to humankind ... The English, on the other hand, believe domestic animals should be completely under humankind's rule, virtually without independence. The English practice of killing with their own hands dogs that are unwanted or terminally ill is based on their belief that the life and death of such animals should be completely controlled by human beings, the master" (Suzuki & Miura, in Milestone, 2003, p.102-103).

Three concerns emerge from reading this excerpt. First, it calls into question the underlying belief system of those who prepared this material and their rationale for teaching English. Second, one wonders what affective and attitudinal outcomes could result from exposure to this material. In particular, what messages would students (who have had little or no contact with
foreigners) receive about the target culture. Lastly, this is a reminder to ELT teachers everywhere to re-examine our rationale for teaching English, and to seek a higher purpose beyond the economic and commercial demands of globalization. This is perhaps the most critical reason to be concerned about students' perceptions.

The higher purpose of teaching English

This author contends that ethical English Language Teaching necessitates consideration of the “Big Picture”, the context in which we conduct our educational practice, as “Language acquisition is meaningful only when it is viewed as part of the human condition” (Sampedro & Hillyard, 2004, p.5). Linguapax situates “. . . language education within a wider framework of education for peace” (Marti, 1996). Linguapax also advocates a linguistic response to world problems through the use of materials and methodologies that integrate global solidarity “while eliminating stereotypes and negative prejudices” (Marti, 1996). “Given that language and thought are directly related . . . language (is) a natural vehicle for fostering cross cultural, cross boundary understanding” (Sampedro & Hillyard, 2004, p. 6).

Cultural diversity

EFL teachers are therefore entrusted with "enhancing mutual understanding, respect, peaceful co-existence, and cooperation among nations" (Marti, 1996). This can be accomplished by teaching appreciation for cultural diversity which offers opportunities for learning about “values that might serve to construct happier, more humane societies . . .” (Marti, 1996). Learning a foreign language is "... a particularly good way of exploring each culture's values, its universe of symbols, its desires and creativity” (Marti, 1996). This author contends, however, that fostering international goodwill must also incorporate awareness of cross-cultural commonality. Since personal friendship is based on what people have in common this also applies to international friendship. Failure to emphasize commonality runs the risk of generating divisiveness, as is the case with Othering (Lieb, 2008).

Othering

It is not in the teaching of “Big C” or achievement culture that problems arise, but in the teaching of “Little C” or behavior culture that is often treated “in an anecdotal, peripheral, or supplementary way, depending on the interest and awareness of teachers and students” (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993, p.7). Most would agree that it is difficult to teach about cultural differences without making one culture seem superior to another. This is known as Othering, defined by
Johnson (1999) as "When a group is described in a way that makes that group seem inferior to or different from one's own". The above textbook excerpt demonstrates how Othering can “create and perpetuate rather than reflect cultural differences” (Kubota, 1999, p.16).

In Asian ELT, Othering manifests itself as both Orientalism and Occidentalism, depending on the “weltangshaung” or world view of the practitioner. Said (in Susser, 1998) defined Orientalism as “representing Japan as the Other, limiting what we can know of Japan, and in some cases, expressing prejudice or hostility” (p.49). On the other hand, Occidentalism has been defined as "stereotyped and sometimes dehumanizing views on the so-called Western world, including Europe, the United States, and Australia . . ." (Buruma & Margalit, 2004). It could be argued that the four characteristics Said attributes to Orientalism, can also be attributed to Occidentalism. These are Othering, Stereotyping, Representing, and Essentializing (in Susser, 1998). Such characterizations exist both explicitly and implicitly in certain ELT textbooks, in some teaching methodologies, in research on cross cultural learning, and sometimes in ELT discourse communities.

**Examples of Othering**

Polarizing characterizations of Western and Asian culture that exist in certain ELT discourse communities include the juxtaposition of so-called Western values such as individualism, human rights, and result orientation with alleged Asian values such as collectivism, acceptance of status and harmony orientation respectively (Lewis, 2007). Similarly, Western and Asian communication styles are often contrasted as Talkative versus Reserved; Extrovert versus Introvert; Half listens versus Listens Carefully (Lewis, 2007). Furthermore learning styles have been categorized as Socratic versus Confucian, where the former is intrinsically motivated and sees the teacher as facilitator; while the latter is extrinsically motivated and respects the authority of the teacher (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995, in McKay, 2002).

One drawback to these characterizations, is that while they may contain grains of truth, they can also be demeaning to either culture. They also ignore the fact that, “National identities are not monolithic” (Kramsch, 1993, p.83, in McKay, Ch. 4). Another problem is that depictions of Confucian and Socratic learning styles are not supported by extensive classroom observation (Kubota, 1999). Furthermore, they can lead to “ideas of otherness and foreignness” (McKay, 2002, p. 106), and are ultimately contrary to UNESCO's goal of “promoting languages as a means of dialogue and international integration” (2007). According to Said (1978), “When one
uses categories like 'Oriental' and 'Western' as both the starting and end points of analysis . . .
the result is usually to polarize the distinction – the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the
Westerner more Western – and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions,
and societies . . . this division itself is an expression of hostility.” (in Susser, 1998, p.50)

The Japanese Context: A Special Case
Japan is a relatively homogeneous society where less than one percent of the population is
known as the "Uchi-Soto" (inside-outside wall) exists which emphasizes an inherent difference
between the Japanese and the rest of the world” (Yoneoka, 1999, in Yoneoka, 2000, p.11).
According to Lewis (2007) this sense of “separateness” was derived from Japan's remoteness
over two millennia, and period of complete isolation up to 1853. In this context, therefore, there
is an even greater need to emphasize commonality between Japanese students and foreigners to
foster cross-cultural friendship. Emphasizing only differences runs the risk of exacerbating pre-
existing ideas about separateness.

Avoiding Divisive ELT
Since all pedagogical practice yields affective and attitudinal outcomes, teachers must devote
careful attention to these outcomes. Reflective teaching and awareness of our “weltangshaung”
(world view) are critical. Hammond (2006) recommends teaching from the perspective of
critical pedagogy, or an awareness of how educational practices may be “. . . shaped by wider,
socio-political forces, and in the interests of dominant social groups” (p.549). Such self
examination may be useful for the English teacher who recently described English Language
has the capacity to colonize the mental universe of the people on whom this language is thrust”
(Khan, 2008). If this kind of inflammatory rhetoric characterizes a teacher's “weltangshaung,”
and is adopted into the students' core belief system, it dims the likelihood that they will achieve
any cross-cultural friendship. However, practitioners who approach ELT with the goal of
generating global unity, are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

The Small Scale Study
To investigate student perceptions, the author devised the following three research questions.
(1) How do students feel about communicating with foreigners?
(2) What are students' perceptions of foreigners?
(3) Do students perceive themselves as more similar to or different from foreigners?

Method
A questionnaire was prepared in English and administered in Japanese to 90 EFL students at a small Japanese university. The students were spread over six classes (four classes of English majors, one class of Law majors, and one class of students studying Chinese), and exhibited a wide range of English proficiency and motivation. They were assured that participation was voluntary, that their responses would be kept confidential and would have no impact on their grades. Students were asked to answer "Yes", "No", or "Unsure" to each statement and to elaborate in Japanese on any "Unsure" answer. They were told that for the purposes of the questionnaire, the word “foreigner” would refer to native English speakers who reside in Japan. Written comments from completed questionnaires were translated into English by a Japanese EFL teacher.

Results
The complete questionnaire results are included in Appendix A. With regard to communicating with foreigners, about half of the students (51%) admitted feeling stressed or nervous when talking to foreigners, but a large majority (86%) - especially among the English majors - claimed they enjoy talking to foreigners and 87% would like more contact. Fifty percent of students reported not having foreign friends (chiefly among the law students). At the same time, among the 46% who claimed to have foreign friends, the highest percentage was among the 3rd and 4th year English majors, most of whom had been on study abroad programs. A little more than half the students (57%) said they feel comfortable if a foreigner asks for help, such as with directions, information, etc. Among the 43% who said they do not feel comfortable or are unsure, the majority were Chinese and Law majors.

Responses to perceptions of foreigners were notably consistent. The majority rejected the idea that foreigners were too individualistic (80%), rude (71%) and too casual/informal (80%). A smaller majority (57%) agreed that foreigners were open-minded and tolerant. While 69% disagreed that foreigners were too direct, a sizable minority (18%) felt that they were too direct. A significant number (80%) did not think that foreigners should behave more like Japanese people.

Finally, with regard to similarities and differences, only 22% felt more similar to than different
from foreigners, 44% felt more different and 22% were unsure. At the same time, 74% did not feel that cultural differences would impede close friendships with foreigners.

A complete list of student comments is included in Appendix B.

**Discussion**

It appears that most of the students polled enjoy communicating with foreigners and would like more contact with them. This is notable given their relatively limited contact with foreigners and the possibility that they may have been exposed to unfavourable stereotypes. The stress or nervousness felt by many students when talking to foreigners appeared to be related to their English ability (particularly among law students) rather than to a negative perception of foreigners in general. There seemed to be a general willingness to help, and pleasure at being asked. A Chinese major commented, "I'm glad to be asked, and I want to help, but I'm unsure whether my English is good enough to be understood." That almost all the English majors said they enjoy talking to foreigners could possibly be related to the university English program which offers them opportunities to study abroad and have contact with native English speakers. This speaks to the value of study abroad programs not only for enhancing language fluency, but also for cultivating cross-cultural friendship and mutual understanding. The fact that the Law and Chinese majors did not have such overseas experiences may allow them to maintain a perception of difference or separateness, which may also lead to nervousness in communication. However they too, for the most part, said that they enjoy and would like more contact with foreigners. This underscores the value of integrative motivation in ELT.

Positive perceptions of foreigners and apparent acceptance of so-called "Western" qualities as individualism and "being casual/informal" could be indicative of students' tolerance and open-mindedness. An English major commented that "Individualism is not so bad because personality is important." This suggests that students may have overcome negative stereotyping to which they may have been exposed. Another comment, "I think they are casual and informal, but not overly so," suggests that the supposed "differences" between Western and Asian values and behaviour are not as pronounced as some discourse suggests (Lewis, 2007). Based on this, it could be argued that over-emphasis of these "Western" qualities could adversely affect students' perceptions of foreigners and impede cross-cultural friendship.

On the other hand, a significant minority felt that foreigners are too direct. This could be
explained by the differing linguistic structures and pragmatic rules of English and Japanese. That most students felt that foreigners should not try to behave like the Japanese suggests an appreciation of diversity and an openness to new ideas and influences. However, a possible negative explanation could be that students would prefer that foreigners not try to integrate into Japanese society, allowing the "uchi-soto" (inside-outside) wall (Yoneoka, 1999) to remain intact.

Perhaps the most notable finding from this study is that most students appear to perceive themselves as more different from than similar to foreigners. This could be attributed to a lack of contact with foreigners. To quote one student, "I don't know because I haven't had a chance to meet a lot of foreigners." Another student commented that, "I think the way of thinking is very different". A third student acknowledged the cross-cultural commonality by saying, "We may have some commonalities because we are human beings, but we may also have differences due to different ways of thinking." This would seem to support the contention that the main differences among peoples are superficial, but beneath the surface, we are united by our common humanity. However, that so many students felt more different from than similar to foreigners could be attributed to Japan's alleged "separateness" mentality. Interestingly, however, this perception of difference does not appear to influence how students feel about friendship with foreigners suggesting that perceived "difference" may actually contribute to cross-cultural friendship. However, there is no way to determine whether or not friendship would endure after the "novelty factor" wears off.

**Conclusion**

Students' positive perceptions of foreigners speaks to the value of study abroad programs and university EFL programs that facilitate contact between Japanese students and native English speakers. This allows students to discover commonality essential for cross-cultural friendship. Students' perceptions of difference suggest that the Japanese "separateness mentality" could be exacerbated by emphasizing difference to the neglect of commonality. It seems counter productive to erect cultural barriers after breaking down language barriers. The chief caveat, however, is that although young people, by nature, tend to be open to new ideas, as they mature, their perceptions naturally evolve. Nunan and Lamb's "Garden Model" theory (1996) contends that when seeds of learning are sown, they will later sprout and grow. In this case, 10-20 years into the future is the time when seeds of divisiveness could potentially sprout, grow, and bear fruit. Therefore, it is essential to engage in reflective, ethical teaching practices, incorporating
appreciation of cultural diversity as well as cultural commonality. After all "The key to mutual respect and tolerance for cultures and people throughout the world is the recognition of our differences, while acknowledging the underlying universality of mankind. Both types of acceptance are necessary - either one alone is bound to lead to discrimination and ethnocentrism" (Yoneoka, 2000, p.11). This, in the author's view, is why student perceptions of us does and should matter.

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References


**Appendix A: Intercultural Communication Survey Results (N = 90)**

In the following questions, the word “foreigner” refers to native speakers of English from America and other Western countries, who reside in Japan.
## Total Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) I feel stressed or nervous when I talk to foreigners.</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) I enjoy talking to foreigners.</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) I have foreign friends.</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) I would like to have more contact with foreigners.</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) I feel comfortable if a foreigner asks me for help.</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Cultural differences would prevent me from having close friendships with foreigners.</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) Foreigners are too individualistic.</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Foreigners who live in Japan should try to behave more like Japanese people.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Foreigners are open-minded and tolerant.</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Foreigners seem rude to me.</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) There are more similarities than differences between foreigners and Japanese.</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Foreigners are too casual and informal.</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) Foreigners are too direct.</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
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### Appendix B: Comments from Students Who Chose “Unsure”

Note: The majority of the following comments were translated from Japanese into English by a Japanese EFL teacher. In cases where students wrote comments in English, these were not edited. In cases where several students made the same comment, the comment is followed by the number of students who made it.
(1) I feel stressed or nervous when I talk to foreigners.
- I'm anxious about expressing myself in English.
- It depends on the time and the situation.

(2) I enjoy talking to foreigners.
- I'm anxious about expressing myself in English.
- Conversation depends on the person.
- It depends on the person.
- Because you cannot speak with foreigners if you don't know English.

(3) I have foreign friends.
- I have some foreigners I say "hello" to when I meet them, but I'm not sure I can call them "friends".
- I have a foreign friend who got Japanese citizenship.
- I have acquaintances.

(4) I would like to have more contact with foreigners.
- By meeting foreigners, I can learn a lot. But I cannot speak English, so I don't have many chances to meet them.
- I want to make some friends, but if I have too many foreign friends, I may get nervous.
- I don't have a chance to meet them. If I had, I would think so.

(5) I feel comfortable if a foreigner asks me for help.
- Because if I don't know the answer, I can't explain.
- I don't exactly feel comfortable, but I may feel comfortable if it leads to a friendship.
- I am glad when I can answer by myself, and not glad when I can't.
- You can agree or disagree too much.
- Being asked for help with directions may be good practice, but I get embarrassed if I hear many unfamiliar words.
- Because I'm worried that I might confuse them even though I want to help them.
- I'm glad to be asked for help, but I doubt that I can explain well.
- I'm glad to be asked, and I want to help, but I'm unsure whether my English is good enough to be understood.
- I'm glad to be relied on, but I'm unsure whether I can solve it by myself.
- I'll feel uncomfortable if I'm asked something I don't understand.
- At the present time, if I am asked for help, I cannot answer, but I would like to help as much as possible.
- I'm glad to be asked, but I'm worried if I will be understood because of my English ability.
- I feel neither happy nor sad.
- I don't feel glad when I'm asked for help when they're having a problem. I feel sorry for them.
- It depends on the person.
- I'm glad, but there are many times I cannot communicate very well, because I can't speak English very well. If they come to Japan, I want them to study Japanese a little before they come. They appear a little "put out" when my English isn't good.
(6) Cultural differences would prevent me from having close friendships with foreigners.
- It doesn't matter.
- It depends on the person.
- In my experience sometimes foreigners come on a homestay to Japan. Some of them try to make their own culture look good. I feel embarrassed. Considering this, cultural differences may prevent friendship, but I think teachers at our university are not like that.
- It wouldn't just be cultural differences that would prevent it.
- Culture or where someone is from doesn't matter. If we understand each other's feelings and have empathy, that is more important than any language barrier.
- Because there are cultural differences, having communication is fun.
- You cannot generalize.

(7) Foreigners are too individualistic.
- Individualism is not because of nationality but because of personality.
- It's each person.
- It depends on the person (2).
- Individualism is not so bad because personality is important.
- Because I have not had a close relationship with foreigners.
- It's good to have your own opinion, but isn't it important to have harmony?
- We can't generalize because people are all different.

(8) Foreigners who live in Japan should try to behave more like Japanese people.
- Not everyone should, but some people may.
- Maybe Japanese people seem unique because they hide their emotions.
- Because I'm not Japanese.
- Because they are in Japan, I think they can behave like Japanese, or they can be themselves. It depends on the person.
- I think foreigners who live in Japan should or can live as they are accustomed to, while adapting to Japanese culture.
- It depends on the person.

(9) Foreigners are open-minded and tolerant.
- This is not because of nationality but because of personality.
- It depends on the person (13).
- I don't know because I haven't had a chance to meet a lot of foreigners.
- I've not thought so.
- We cannot make general statements about foreigners.
- I can't say either because the category "foreigners" is too broad.
- Because I have not had a close relationship with foreigners.
- Because I don't know very well.
- It doesn't matter whether they're foreigners or not.
We can't generalize because people are all different.
- There are many different kinds of people.
- Not all foreigners are open-minded and tolerant.
- You cannot generalize.
- Because I don't think all foreigners are tolerant, and actually I have a foreign acquaintance who is unaccepting.

(10) **Foreigners seem rude to me.**
- This is not because of nationality but because of personality.
- It depends on the person (9).
- I think the word "rude" is not correct.
- You can agree or disagree too much.
- We cannot make general statements about foreigners.
- Because I have not had a close relationship with foreigners.
- Because I don't know, but they're not as likely to change their opinions as Japanese people. Japanese people's opinions are influenced by other people depending on who they are.
- Some foreigners (like Japanese) care about the little things, and some don't. Whether they are rude or not, I cannot say.
- We can't generalize because people are all different.

(11) **There are more similarities than differences between foreigners and Japanese.**
- This is not because of nationality but because of personality.
- I don't know (4).
- I think the way of thinking is very different.
- It depends on the person (4).
- I don't know because I haven't had a chance to meet a lot of foreigners.
- There are some similarities and differences.
- I have not thought about it very much.
- We may have some commonalities because we are human beings, but we may also have differences due to different ways of thinking.
- You can agree or disagree too much.
- Because I'm not Japanese.
- There are similarities and differences even among Japanese. It depends on the person. We are the same human beings, so we may have many similarities. But I'm not sure if I can detect the similarities and differences in terms of "Japanese" and "foreigners".
- Because I have not had a close relationship with foreigners.
- It's natural to have cultural differences, because the country is different. Also there are personal differences.
- I don't really think so.
- It doesn't matter whether they're foreigners or not.
- We can't generalize because people are all different.
- There are both differences and similarities.
- Because there is the same number of similarities and differences.
- You cannot generalize.
- I'm not aware of it.

(12) **Foreigners are too casual and informal.**
- I think they are casual and informal, but not overly so.
- I think so, sometimes.
- I don't understand the meaning of the question.
- It depends on the person (5).
- it is not possible to disagree with this because being casual is also being more relaxed.
- It doesn't matter whether they're foreigners or not.

(13) **Foreigners are too direct.**
- I think they are more direct than Japanese.
- I don't know very well.
- It depends on the person; sometimes being direct is good, sometimes bad.
- It doesn't matter whether they're foreigners or not, it depends on the person.
- We can't generalize because people are all different.
- Not all foreigners are too direct.
- I don't have an opinion.
- Because I think there are people who are not too direct.
- It depends on the person (2).