

“The culture’s really different here”: Facilitating successful intercultural encounters at the University of Tokyo

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The myth of foreign students as ‘internationalising agents’

- ❖ “Internationalisation creates the opportunities for intercultural encounters. But whether they actually come about is another matter [...] and even if encounters do come about, they can fail.” (Wächter 2010: 46)

Internationalizing Japanese universities

- ❖ 1997 government report: “Japanese higher education institutions must become ‘international centres of learning’ to which students and scholars of the world are attracted.”
- ❖ Establishment of programs in English considered consistent with this goal
- ❖ By 2001, 78,812 international students in Japan - 80% from China, Korea or Taiwan (engineering 33%; humanities 14%)
- ❖ ‘Asian regional center’, rather than a ‘global center’

(Tsuneyoshi 2005)

Impediments to internationalizing Japanese universities

- ❖ Language barriers: “Japan is the most disadvantaged industrialised nation interns of the present international language power structure, which rotates around the English language. Japan is a non-western country and, not being a former western colony, does not have any strong links to a western language at any educational level.” (Tsuneyoshi 2005: 68)
- ❖ Poor intercultural skills of Japanese students & faculty
- ❖ Limited & expensive student housing
- ❖ Lectures often irrelevant or to international students

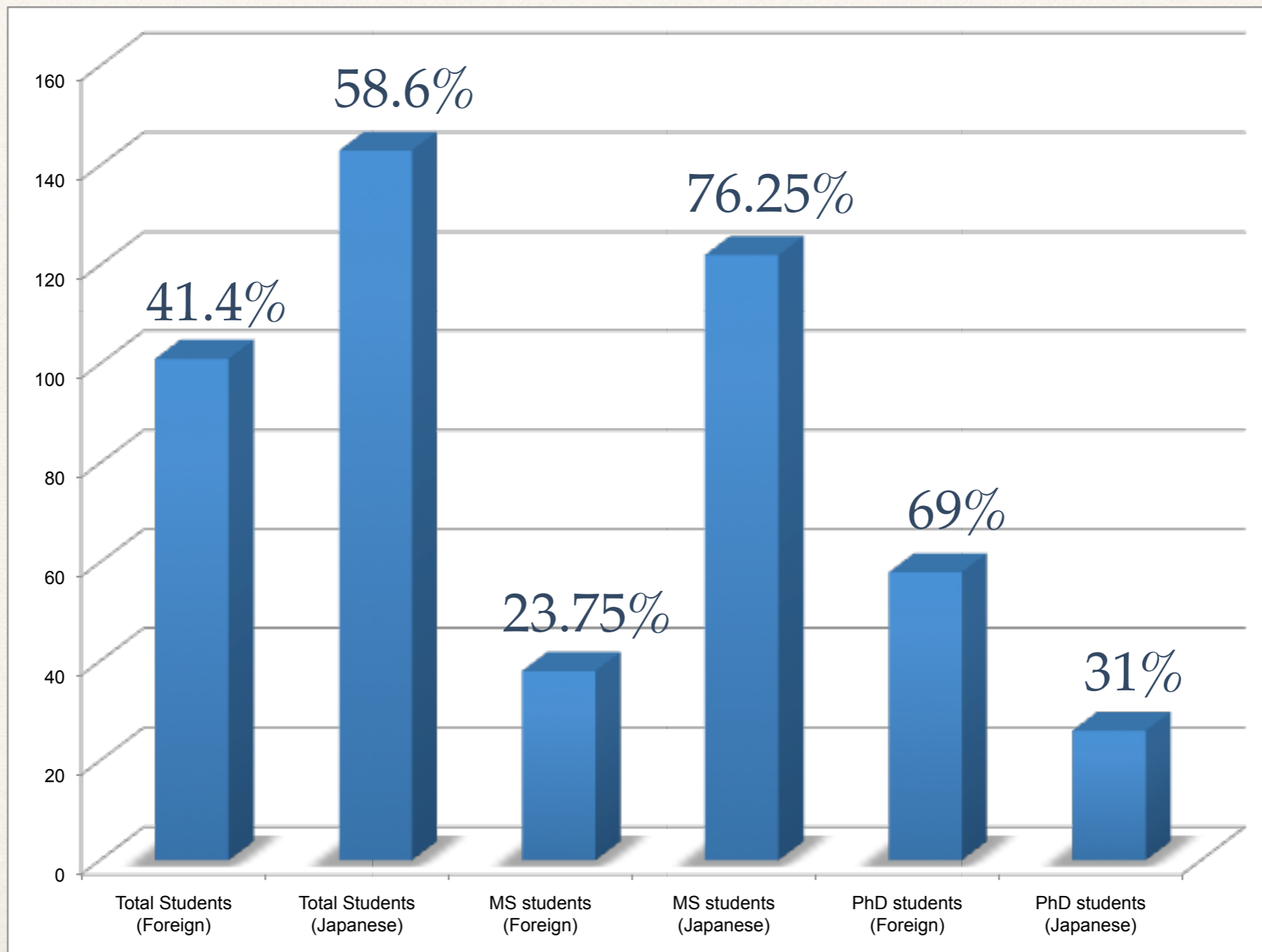


Department of Civil Engineering, University of Tokyo

Incoming students: Where are they from?



Postgraduate student population - Department of Civil Engineering, University of Tokyo



Survey of foreign students (August 2013)

- ❖ To better understand our foreign students' experiences of studying at the University of Tokyo
- ❖ To identify ways to improve the service we offer foreign students in the Department of Civil Engineering

Overview of the pilot survey

- * Link to the survey sent to 100 graduating Civil Engineering students in August, 2013
- * 63 completed surveys received (63%)
- * 14 sections (45 questions) attempt to cover all aspects of life at the University of Tokyo (identified as important by foreign students):
 - (a) Application procedure; (b) Arrival in Japan; (c) Housing;
 - (d) Registration issues; (e) Travel to university; (f) Lectures;
 - (g) Making friends; (h) Internet access; (i) Financial matters; (j) Library services; (k) Communicating in English on campus; (l) Meeting dietary or religious needs on campus

Overview of the pilot survey

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GGR9JX6>

Foreign Students' Survey: The Total Experience

Application procedure

20%

*** 4. How clear were relevant the university websites for students wishing to apply to Todai?**

Very unclear Unclear Average Clear Very clear

Comments

For non-Japanese speaker, seeing kanji can give a fe

*** 5. How would you describe the overall application procedure when applying to study at Todai?**

Unsatisfactory Poor Adequate Good Excellent

Comments

*** 6. How would you describe the application forms you were required to complete, and their accompanying explanatory notes?**

Unsatisfactory Poor Adequate Good Excellent

Comments

*** 7. How would you describe the help you received from Todai staff to complete the application procedure?**

Unsatisfactory Poor Adequate Good Excellent

Comments

Results: Average ratings

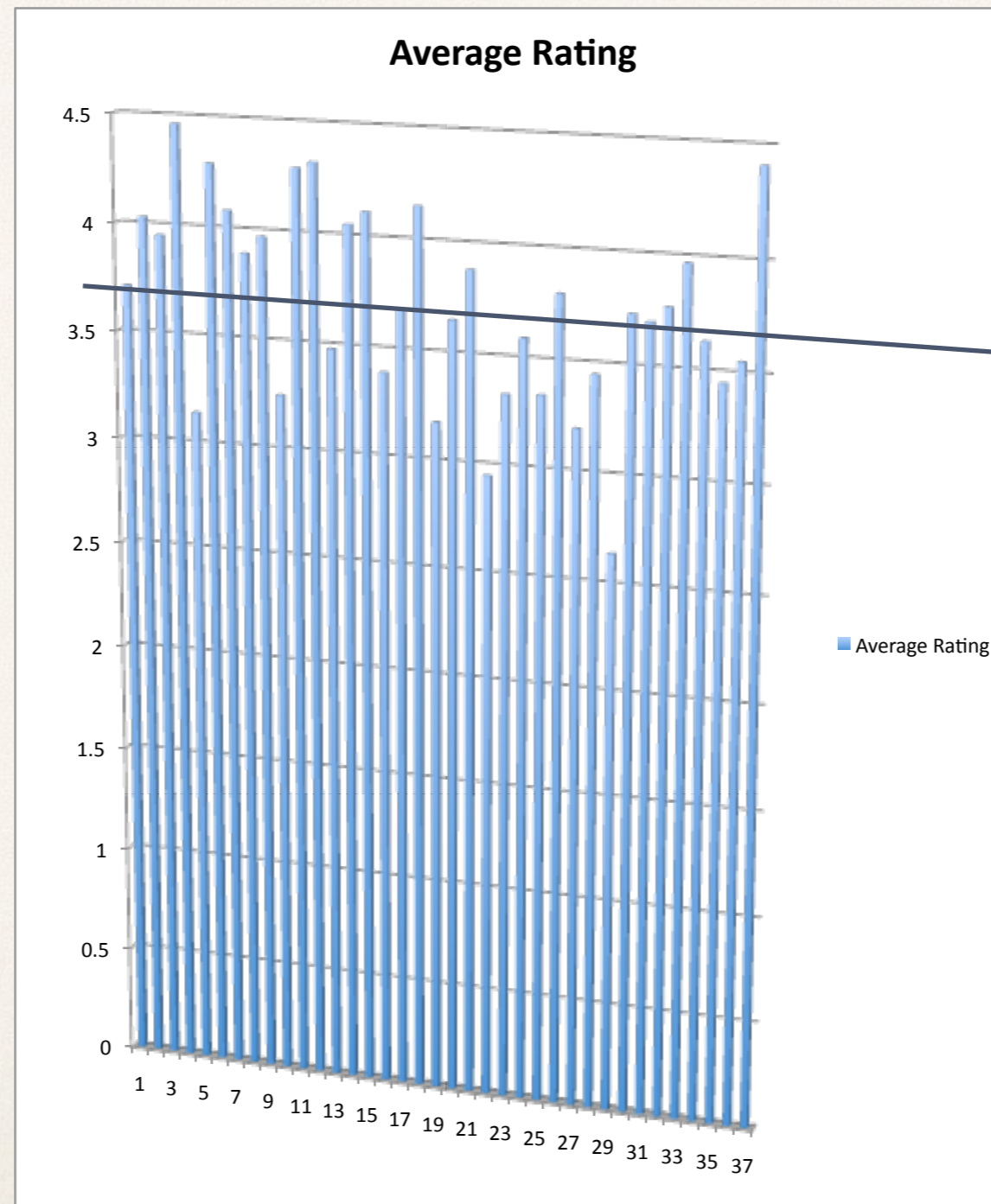
Excellent

Good

Average

Poor

Very poor



Lower ratings

- ❖ Information on cheap places to buy food / clothes in Tokyo
- ❖ Help with making Japanese friends
- ❖ Time taken to receive final decision on application
- ❖ Getting a university internet account
- ❖ Choice of dormitory

Sample comments: 'Tutors' (mentors)

- ❖ “The system of providing a tutor is wonderful and it helped me settle in Japan very quickly.”
- ❖ “My tutor here was living with her parents and had no idea about buying basic things like cleaning products and things for daily life, all in all she was a nice girl but not really suited as a tutor. Setting up a meeting with international students who have been living here for more than 1 year would have been helpful.”
- ❖ “I really appreciate having a Japanese tutor. However, I think the Japanese tutors must be also informed that the Japanese railway system is not easily navigable for first timers in Tokyo. For example, tutors must be informed that it is not advisable to meet in big stations and that exact information about exits and markers must be given.”

Sample comments: 'Tutors' (mentors)

- ❖ “Tutors are very helpful, but sometimes they can make us feel like we are not in control over our own options. It would be great if tutors could take us to places with English services, so we can be part of the decision making.”
- ❖ “There is a need to tell tutor about the Halal food availability in the university premises. They don't have any information in this regard at all.”
- ❖ “It would be a great improvement however if the Todai students had more confidence in interacting with foreigners [...] I don't see why they should be afraid of interaction with us. Foreigners are not evil, better or strange, we are just ordinary people who are different from you.”

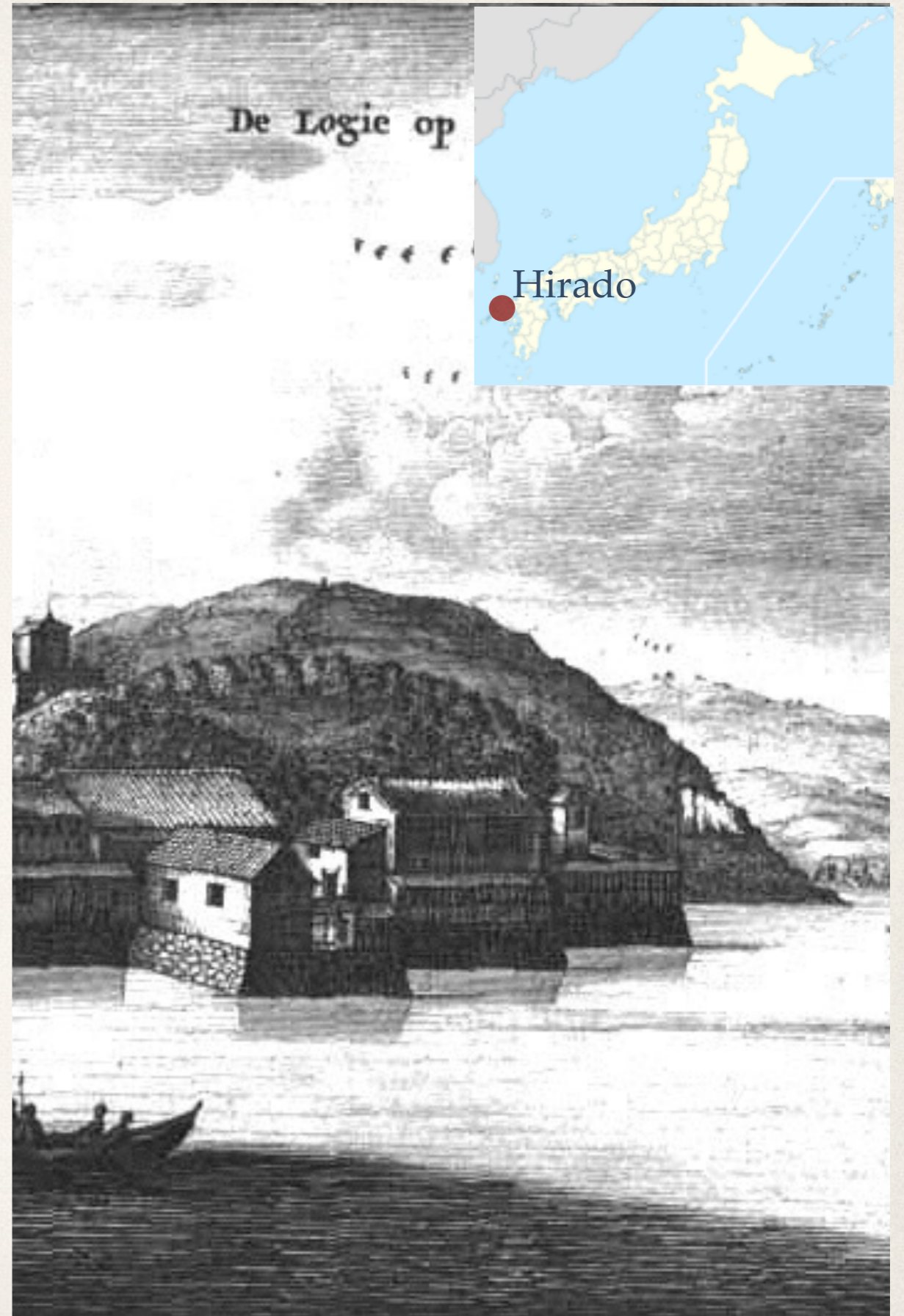
The myth of foreign students as ‘internationalising agents’

“A long-standing myth is that more foreign students on campus will produce more internationalized institutional culture and curriculum. While this may be the expectation of universities, reality often paints a different picture. In many institutions international students feel marginalized socially and academically and often experience ethnic or racial tensions. Frequently, domestic undergraduate students are known to resist, or at best to be neutral about undertaking joint academic projects or engaging socially with foreign students - unless specific programs are developed by the university or instructor.” (Knight 2011: 14)

鎖国 (Sakoku: “closed country”)

(1633 - 1853) “The Land of the Rising Sun had entered a period known as *sakoku* - the closed country. She had seen enough of troublesome foreigners and their bitter internecine wars. Now, after a century of contact, Japan closed her windows on the world and denied traders entry into her profitable markets and cities. The few mariners who dared to sail there - or were unlucky enough to be shipwrecked - found themselves arrested, tortured and killed.”

(Milton 2002: 370)



Japan - an inward-looking, homogenous society

“When I went to Manila to learn English last year and when I traveled around Europe countries in this spring vacation, I realized that unthinkable foreign ideas for us Japanese or contacting with another cultures and values make us realize how narrow our view of the world are!” (University of Tokyo student)

A lack of strategic competence

Strategic Competence: a speaker's ability to exploit verbal or nonverbal communication strategies when communication problems arise:

- *Avoidance or reduction strategies* such as topic avoidance or message abandonment to try to keep conversation inside areas where the speaker feels in control;
- *compensatory strategies* such as circumlocution or mime when a word is not known;
- *stalling strategies* such as using hesitation devices or repetition to hold the turn in conversation while a message is formulated;
- *interactional strategies* such as asking for repetition or clarification where the speaker makes use of the linguistic resources of other interlocutors to maintain conversation.

(Gilmore 2011)

Tutor training: Goals

- ❖ To raise awareness of the difficulties for international students, associated with adapting to a new & unfamiliar culture
- ❖ To improve tutors ability to empathise with alternative cultural perspectives
- ❖ To facilitate successful initial intercultural encounters

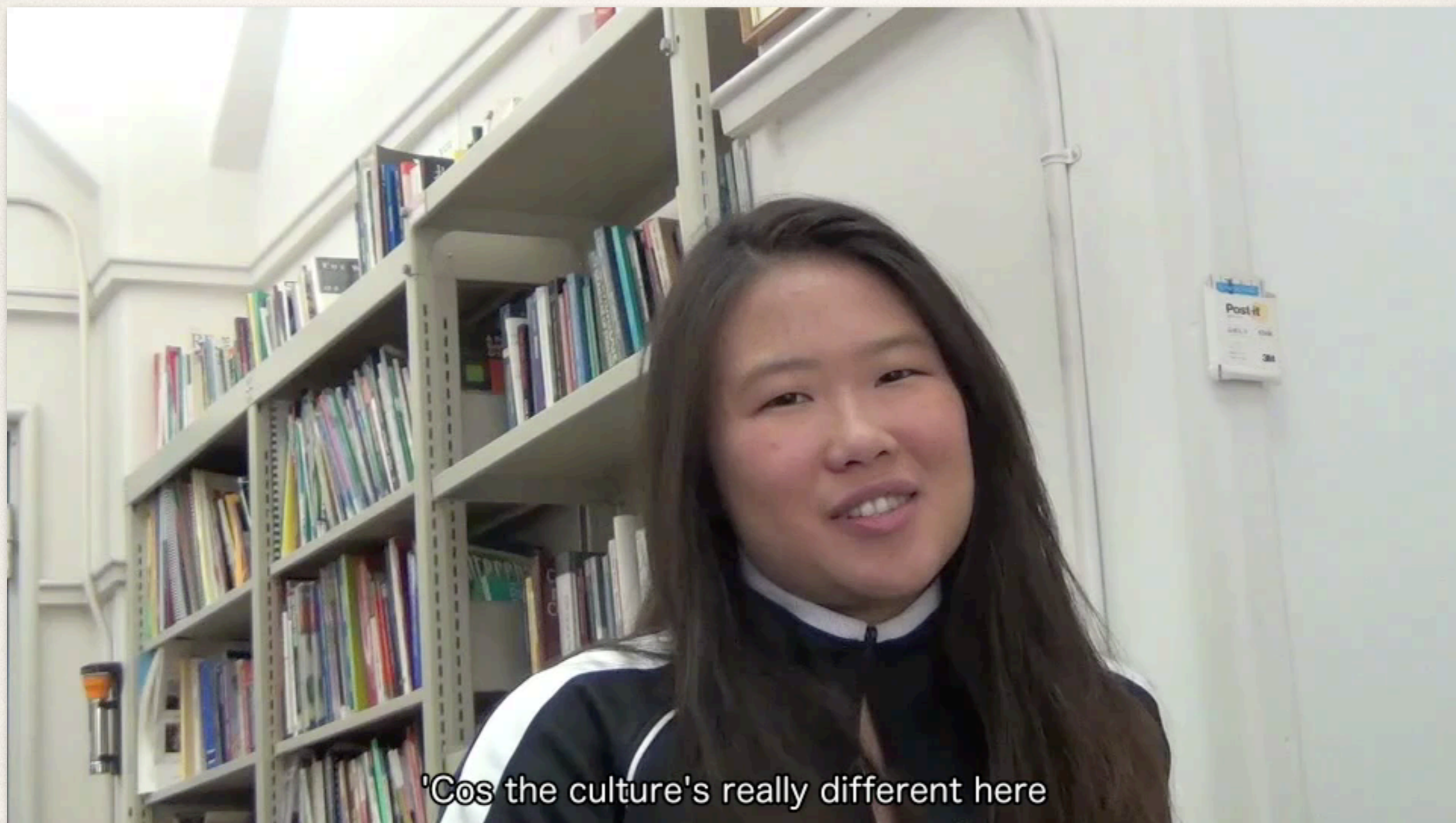
Student comments: Listening task

Student interviews: Starting a new life in Tokyo

Watch the interview extracts of foreign students talking about their experiences in the first few weeks after arrival in Japan. Make notes below of any points they raise which might influence your role as a tutor.

Name (Country)	Notes
1. Min Ju (Korea)	
2. Jing (Thailand)	
3. Sunshine (Philippines)	
4. Ida (Indonesia)	

Student comments



'Cos the culture's really different here

Tutor orientation - public transportation



Tutor feedback

- ❖ “Foreign students feels more lonely in Japan that I think. It is the most important for us to be friendly with them, even if we are not good at English.”
- ❖ “Actually I didn’t know they had quite a few problems getting fixed to Japan culture. I was especially surprised by the food problems, mainly from muslims and vegetarians.”
- ❖ “Actually I got to feel responsibility, because some international students referred to problems with their own tutors. It’s not just work to tutor someone.”
- ❖ By watching video and hearing opinions of international students, I reflected my self as a tutor, and I want to be a better tutor.”

Student feedback

- ❖ Time to complete administrative procedures = 1.5 - 2 days
- ❖ Average rating for tutor = 9.6 / 10
- ❖ Sample comments:

“Because of the help of my tutor in first few days, I was able to get around the city / campus on my own without any problem.”

“I had a wonderful experience with my tutor. If I find any things which can improve the orientation program, I will let you know.”

References

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Thank you!

ありがとうございました