

# A Reconsideration of "Thinking in English": Based on the English Teaching Theory of Toru Matsumoto

*Hiroshima University Graduate School*      Yoshifumi Mikuma

## 1. Introduction

It has been commonly pointed out that in order to convey meaning in a foreign language, you have to think in that language; that the Japanese learners' foreign language, in this particular case English, is not the result of thinking in that language but of translation, and thus, the learner cannot communicate well; and that Japanese should start thinking in English if they are to be effective in cross-cultural interactions.

What then, does it mean for a Japanese to think in English? Some theorists, as well as practitioners, who strongly uphold this notion have tried to completely sweep away Japanese from the classroom. Others have persistently maintained that it is impossible to do without the mother tongue. The height of debate was observed only during a limited period of time in the history of foreign language teaching like a transient fad, leaving few, if any, clues to a substantial set of principles on which one can rely. What is puzzling is that the fancy slogan of "thinking in English" seems to have its own momentum. Many a teacher, confronted with a learner undergoing communication breakdown, casually falls into such clichés as "That's because you are not thinking in English," or "Try to think in English when you speak English."

This study first examines differences in attitude toward the use of the mother tongue in classroom situations among scholars of divergent outlooks, hoping that some significant insights into thinking in a foreign language will come to light. Then an attempt follows to develop a definition of thinking in English that is meaningful to teachers in classrooms in Japan, by referring to the work of the late Dr. Toru Matsumoto. His mother tongue being Japanese, he was, like us, a learner of English, however, unlike many Japanese, he managed to achieve an unrivaled proficiency, such that there are few who can possibly hold a candle to him. He certainly was active in informing people about what he endured to reach this level, through his publications, teaching practice as a teacher, and 22 years of broadcasting NHK's Radio English Conversation program. Dr. Matsumoto is noted for his pet theory of thinking in English and based all his activities, both as a teacher and a learner, on it.

## 2. An Overview of Different Perspectives on Mother Tongue Use

When the controversy over the use of the mother tongue in the classroom context is at issue, some possible classifications could be: a) complete exclusion of the mother tongue

(strong version of thinking in a foreign language); b) active use of the mother tongue (thinking in a foreign language as a myth); and c) partial allowance for the mother tongue with a view to thinking in a foreign language (weak version of thinking in a foreign language) In the following, each category is examined through an overview of the respective proponents' theories.

## 2.1 Complete Exclusion of the Mother Tongue

The clamor against vernacular use raged at the same time as people were climbing on the direct-method bandwagon in the 19th century. The common denominator of the affiliates of the comprehensive "direct method" is underscored by a quotation from Viëtor's *Der Sprachunterricht Muss Umkehren*:

I also agree completely with those who, unlike Kühn, condemn the practice of translating connected German texts into the foreign language. If we can bring our pupils to think and express themselves in the foreign language in addition to their mother tongue, we shall have accomplished what we set out to do. Translation into the foreign language is an art which is inappropriate for the school classroom. (1886, 361)

So the direct method proponents believed that clearing the mother tongue away in the process of teaching and learning would surely lead to thinking in the foreign language concerned. On a similar manner of thinking are A. R. Bolitho (1976, 113-114), H. A. Cartledge (1953, 87-88), P. B. King (1973, 55), B. V. Belyayev (1963, 57) and others.

Both theorists and practitioners operating in Japan were quick to champion mother-tongue exclusive theories. Ever since Toyama (1900, I) raised it, the concept of thinking in a foreign language (English) to the exclusion of the vernacular has been of interest in Japan. It remains a long-standing and unremitting theses. Its traces can be detected in Makino (1965, 41), Hayashi (1970, 5).

## 2.2 Active Use of the Mother Tongue

The antithesis of this is that it is preposterous to think that anyone can think in a language other than his/her own. Scholars with this attitude attempt to defend translation and dampen enthusiasm for the direct method. J. O. Gauntlett's point of view is:

Thus although the translation method does not bring about desired habits of thought in learning a foreign language, it does not mean therefore that complete exclusion of the mother tongue will cause a person to think in the new language which he hardly knows. (1961, 39)

This line of argument, backed by W. Stannard Allen (1948, 36), presumes that the mother tongue is always stronger in foreign language learning. "The translation instinct sets in very early," as Bayard Quincy Morgan (1917, 240) asserts. A similar stand was taken by Boni H.-J. Kirstein (1972, 74) and Jimmy Thomas (1976, 405-406), Hiroyoshi Hatori (1982, 67), Akio Oura (1980, 67), Robert L. Politzer (1959, 55), Rinju Ogasawara (1968, 28-29), Colley F. Sparkman (1949, 361), et al.

The obstinate rejection of sweeping away the pupils' native language has always been accompanied by a welcoming call for it, bringing to the fore a dichotomy. However, there has been a more modest line of approach to this delicate subject, one which is open to the use of the vernacular and yet is not satisfied with mere translation. The next section addresses it.

### 2.3 Partial Allowance for the Mother Tongue with a View to Thinking in a Foreign Language.

This could be given the subtitle, "Weak Version of Thinking in a Foreign Language." Mentioning the ideas of Henry Sweet is the surest way to commence a lively discussion of this topic. Clearly he believes in thinking in a foreign language, but takes a dim view of an exclusively mono-lingual approach:

The remedy usually prescribed is to 'Learn to think in the foreign language.' But we cannot think in a foreign language till we have a thorough and ready knowledge of it; so that this advice--sound as it is in itself--does not alter the fact that when we begin to learn a new language we cannot help thinking in our own language.

Thinking in the language implies that each idea is associated directly with its expression in the foreign language instead of being associated first with the native expression, which is then translated into the foreign language. This has led many into the fallacy that if we were only to get rid of translation in teaching a foreign language, substituting pictures or gestures, we should get rid of the cross-associations of our own language. But these cross-associations are independent of translation. They arise simply from the fact that each idea that comes into our minds instantly suggests the native expression of it, whether the words are uttered or not: and however strongly we may stamp the foreign expression on our memories, the native one will always be stronger. (1900, 198)

It is possible that the linguists cited in the previous section might, if asked, be in accord with Sweet, but Sweet has most explicitly stated this view.

H. E. Palmer is also known to have shared the eclectic view, and he has been followed by such linguists as David Atkinson (1987, 245), David Ausubel (1964, 422) and C. J. Dodson (1972, 54). Masao Kunihiro (1979, 53) should be included in this group as a Japanese representative.

### 2.4 Summary

After examining these three groups of theories, no comprehensive definition can be found and hardly any psychological or biological evidence for this has been given. It seems as if they are bandying words about, with a tacit agreement as to their definitions.

A need, then, arises to develop a definition of thinking in English that is meaningful to teachers in classrooms in Japan. The next section attempts to develop this with reference to Dr. Toru Matsumoto, who, unlike those with German language backgrounds and the native English speakers, is Japanese.

### 3. Matsumoto's "Thinking in English"

Dr. Matsumoto's thinking in English is dualistic. And this dualism is one of the things that makes his theory different. Therefore, a close scrutiny of what Dr. Toru Matsumoto refers to as thinking in English will unfold the binary integration of the concept, and attempt to draw some useful implications as to its definition, achievement of which is accessible and realistic to the average or even fledgling learners of English.

#### 3.1 The First Component of Matsumoto's Dualism

In this, he declares, not unlike some of those quoted in the first branch of classification, that thinking in English is the state in which one has completely gotten rid of his/her mother tongue from his/her mind when speaking in the other language. This involves, first, knowing the meaning of a word in English. Discontent with one of his students, who could not answer the question, "What's a horse? Tell me in English.", Dr. Matsumoto stressed:

You can tell what it is by looking at the real thing or a picture of it. You can also define it in words like "a large domestic animal" or "a useful animal that works for us." Each individual may have a different understanding of a thing. But the bottomline is that you understand English words in English. (I have taken the liberty of translating this and all subsequent excerpts from Matsumoto's works, and I acknowledge that any shortcomings in this respect are all mine.) (1965, 43)

The important thing here is for the student not to think of any Japanese word when trying to understand an English word. The first half of this quotation reminds us of what François Gouin referred to as "mental visualization", as well as many of the claims made by the advocates of the strong version of thinking in a foreign language. Matsumoto goes on to say that all this is possible, despite the barrage of criticisms which have been leveled against him, by so arranging the environment and the experiences that they are all in English. He gives an account of how he thinks this environment and these experiences work:

A word gives different impressions to different people. In other words, a word is not a genuine part of a personality until semanticised in one's own way. We 'understand' in the true sense of the word when a sound provokes an emotional

movement in us. In childhood, this emotional movement, or emotional experience, becomes an understanding which subsequently grows into an intellectual understanding. . . . Then, a vast amount of this emotional experience in the English language is required in order to think in it. (1958, 224)

This, Matsumoto maintains, is how such an environment and experiences, enabling one to start excluding the mother tongue, are available.

The no-mother-tongue state involves yet another aspect. That is, solving problems in English. Dr. Matsumoto's interpretation of the word "think" is:

'To think' is the integration of the following verbs. To digest . . . to discuss . . . to study . . . to weigh . . . to review . . . to ponder . . . to judge . . . to decide . . . to remember . . . to recall . . . to remind . . . to form ideas . . . to invent . . . to devise, etc. . . . Do them all in English.

When the telephone rings, think of "The telephone", or "Oh, the telephone's ringing," in English. . . . When you have to decide upon whether to work or to watch the ball game, say to yourself "Shall I work or shall I watch the ball game?", in English. . . . The real thrill about thinking in English lies in making decisions. Human beings get a great feeling of fulfillment in solving daily problems. After all, we have to live through the conflicts that arise day in and day out. I ask you to please use English to make these decisions. Make a point of pondering and deciding on at least one thing a day in English. (1965, 151-153)

He introduces solving arithmetic problems in English as part of this whole idea in addition to playing games in English.

Incidentally, he tries to impress upon the learner the importance of memorization and recitation. However, they are presented not only as methods to make thinking in English possible, but, interestingly enough, also as actual phenomena of it. He addresses the young learners:

The younger you are, the stronger your power of memory is. While the iron is hot, I urge you to do the memorization and recitation. In order to maximize the time when you are thinking in English and to keep thinking in English, for that matter, recite what you have memorized one after the other, just like playing a game. When you are walking or you are seated in the train or on the bus, make sure that an English story or poem is played like a tape-recorder over and over in your mind.

It is not until you have grown old that you will realize just how much it means to you to have pushed yourself through this training as a young learner. (1968, 290)

It has been customarily assumed that memorization and recitation are means, not ends. But in Matsumoto's theory, apparently, replaying what has been memorized, such as in these two

activities, instead of creating something new, is to be included in the idea of thinking in English.

The last point to be made concerning the first half of Matsumoto's dualism is that all the information that is in Japanese should be anglicized prior to storage. He explains:

As long as we live in Japan as Japanese, we cannot possibly rid the Japanese language from our daily lives entirely. . . .

However, I hasten to stress that if we wish to practice the asceticism of thinking in English, we must turn even this Japanese-based life into that of English. (1968, 293)

This means that not only as much information as possible should be gained through English sources, but also that the information gained through Japanese sources, should be translated into English before it is imprinted into one's mind and then retained. In other words, one should clear away any bit of Japanese from the mind.

### 3.2 The Second Component of Matsumoto's Dualism

In the second aspect of his two-fold theorem, Dr. Matsumoto implies that the utterance should be the offspring of English-based ways of thinking. This has nothing to do with filling the mind with English as sounds and letting the English words, phrases and sentences ring in one's ears all the time. Dr. Matsumoto exemplifies:

I mean "Eisaku" (English composition) is part of the job of thinking in English, too. What I call "Eisaku" is neither translation nor composition as it is practiced in schools. It means to "interpret" Japanese sentences into English. (1974, vii)

If you think in Japanese, it won't yield good English. On the other hand, if you think in English and then speak in it, that makes for authentic English. The former is an elaborated imitation and the latter, however poor it is, is the real thing; the former, what we call Japanese English and the latter, even at its worst, uneducated English. (1968, 69)

Whether beautifully done or not, if you are too used to this (translation), you will have a very hard time expressing "Nihon wa fujiyu na koto bakari daga, kangaeyou ni yottewa Nihon hodo jiyu na kuni wa nai." Suppose we try to break it down and translate it according to the grammar, as we were taught to do at school. First, "Nihon wa fujiyu na koto bakari" will be "Japan is full of inconvenient things." "Kangaeyou ni yotte wa" might be converted into "according to the way one thinks", but we cannot be too sure about it. For the remainder, "Nihon hodo jiyu na kuni wa nai," "there is no country as free as Japan" would seem to be perfect. Now put them all together, and we have the following answer: "Japan is full of

inconvenient things, but according to the way one thinks, there is no country as free as Japan.” Regrettably, however, this is just another example of “Japanese English.”

If we first think in English and then say the same thing, the answer would be something like: “Life in Japan has many limitations, but when you look around the whole world, there seems to be no other country where you can live in such perfect freedom as in Japan.” (1965, 41-42)

In summary, there are two streams in what Dr. Matsumoto considers thinking in English: first, the total exclusion of Japanese from the mind, and second, the generation of sentences that are in accord with English chains of thought. Thus, a tentative definition of thinking in English has been reached.

Matsumoto’s theory tends to apply the notion of the total exclusion of the mother tongue to all stages of foreign language use. As far as the exclusion of Japanese is concerned, both the method of the learning process and the ideal state to be achieved can adopt this set of principles. The sentence forming process that is English-based could be discussed in terms of ways of expression, lexical selection, grammar, speech acts, appropriateness to the discourse, etc.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The Launch of the Definition

Belyayev (1963, 49-67) reveals that, on the word level, the difference between the time of reaction to foreign words and to vernacular words can move continuously closer to nil, as the learning advances. But it is not at all clear up to which echelon of learning this is the case. Is it true with longer units of language? (Dr. Matsumoto, however, seems to be positive that this is the case on every level of foreign language development.) Another problem is that it is bewildering to consider whether thinking in English is merely another type of method or something that should be aimed at as an objective of learning and acquisition. (This point was highlighted by Kunihiro in “Eigo de Kangaeru” (1970, 53).)

Granting these, and focusing upon what practical applications can be made of Matsumoto’s theory in a classroom situation with junior and senior high school students, one would do well to let time take care of what is characterized by the first half of Matsumoto’s dualism and hope that it could be achieved in time. That leaves the second half of the discussion as having present relevance to ordinary challengers of a foreign language. Thus, it would be appropriate to launch a definition here, as follows: *Thinking in English means the state of being able to produce English sentences that correspond with the English ways of expression.*

### 4.2 Applications for the Classroom

How can this notion of thinking in English be embodied in a series of classroom activities? In search of an answer to this question, the present author carried out a test with 91 high school students (Mikuma 1991b, 195-203). The test sentences used were so designed that they could elicit the vocabulary items (set phrases) taught at the junior high school level. Two different styles were presented, the first being natural-sounding everyday Japanese and the second, more obviously affected by English like that from direct translation. Surprisingly, in moving from the first to the second test, a sharp rise in both the emergence of the target phrases and the scores was witnessed. The explanations for these results could be as follows: First, the fact that the average emergence rate of the target phrases in Test 2 is over 80% indicates that, at least as far as the five expressions looked at here are concerned, the subjects have learned them well. Second, the overwhelmingly high scores in Test 2 (the average score is 75.6 as compared with Test 1's 36.1) demonstrates the learners' mastery of the usage of the five expressions. (on one condition, that is, with the assistance of only one Japanese equivalent each). In other words, the vocabulary items or grammatical items that were once learned by heart through junior high school study, can be recalled relatively easily if and when exactly the same Japanese translation is the cue.

Take "to know a lot of people", for example. This collocation may occur, among others, when an interlocutor has "interpreted" the Japanese expression "kao ga hiroi" in the way Dr. Toru Matsumoto described. In many cases, at the junior high school level, "to know" is explained as being the same as the Japanese "shitteiru", and "a lot of", as "ooku no", or "takusan no", both in a one-to-one correspondence. It follows that these sets of words, "to know" and "a lot of", can be activated exclusively when something like "takusan no hito wo shitteiru" happens to enter the utterer's mind, and therefore, he/she cannot think in English. The same thing can be said about "how old". This phrase is liable to be connected solely as an inquiry about someone's age. However, it is also a collocation that could be used when "anata no gakko wa soritsu nan'nen desuka?" has been "interpreted", in Matsumoto's terms, or has been thought in English.

For these reasons, the suggestion to be drawn is that an effective attempt to use the native language exemplified above should be made in teaching. Starting out this way would most certainly result in thinking in English. This will necessarily exalt the vernacular intervention, which would seem to be illogical because the motto declared here is "thinking in English." Paradoxically, however, it is expected that by giving a diversity of Japanese sentences as cues, the pupils can break apart the cursed adhesion of one English element and one Japanese equivalent and be awakened to "elasticity awareness" (Mikuma 1991b, 195-203). And this, according to the original definition in this thesis, could be regarded as the onset of thinking in English.

## 5. Conclusion

Now when the mechanism of "thinking" has remain unelucidated, the preachment of "thinking in English" might be just another rhetoric. However, as long as what is advocated in



“thinking in English.” It is only hoped that this little suggestion could serve as a path-finding mark in vocabulary teaching and English teaching on the whole.

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