

Articles

An Introduction to Toru Matsumoto's Novels as English Learning Materials

Shigehiko Iizuka

1. It is possible for us to think in English.

“Is it possible for Japanese to think in English?” This question has been asked for a very long time by the people related to the English language and its education in Japan.

Toru Matsumoto (1913-1979) was one of the most confident and convincing advocates of the theory, “Thinking in English is the most effective way to master it.” He asserts in his book published in 1960: “It is entirely possible to switch from Japanese to English, or from English to Japanese, and think in one language or the other for an indefinite length of time.”^①

Toru Matsumoto was not a mere theoretician. Hundreds of textbooks, methodology books, and novels and poems written by him show how practical his concepts were. He put emphasis on colloquial English, but at the same time he thought very highly of the value of reading. As a matter of fact, most of the stories he wrote for NHK radio English conversation textbooks are also very good reading materials.

He often advised his students, most of whom were listeners to his radio programs (1951-1972) to read stories in English to become good speakers of it. He says in the Foreword to The Seven Stars (1946),

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“Unfortunately, however, books published abroad are expensive. Not so expensive books are old. Most foreign books are too difficult. I suggested to them: Read *The Seven Stars*. It was written by me, and therefore, it cannot be too hard to understand” ②

In the Foreword to *Friendship 1* (1964), he says, “You have been asking me to put together in book form stories and poems appearing in NHK English conversation textbooks. This now I have done. You will find that the English I have used is very easy to understand. It is the kind of English that the people of America are using.” ③

The judgement of difficulty or easiness is hard to define; it is not what the author decides. The reader decides or feels it upon looking at the several pages of the first part of the book. Or rather the name of the author and the title of the book may decide how the reader feels before looking at the first page.

The majority of Japanese students studying English do not enjoy reading in the foreign language. Most of them are afraid of printed materials in English, no matter what they are. Many of their teachers are no better than they are as far as this ‘fear’ is concerned. But that fear will disappear if they begin to read Toru Matsumoto’s stories in English. He was a practical psychologist, too.

The novels by Toru Matsumoto are not so called ‘graded reading materials.’ But they have something very familiar to us and make us feel at home without continually having to consult a dictionary or foot notes. Lack of cultural barriers may be one of the main reasons. The author’s intensive and extensive contact with millions of listeners to his radio and TV (1959-1961) English conversation programs surely gave him the competence to know what kind of English was most helpful and acceptable to the majority of the Japanese who were trying to learn English.

2. Characters and Settings:

The characters in Toru Matsumoto's novels are primarily Japanese, and even the Americans that are found in his stories are of Japanese descent.

The settings are Japanese and American, but the Japanese settings are more numerous. These characteristics of his novels give Japanese readers relief from the burden of having to learn a new language and a new culture at the same time. It is always very difficult to kill two birds with one stone. But we, as teachers, are apt to regard it as something very easy to do, and so we teach how to read in English while giving much of the translation and explanation in Japanese. The result is the students' interest in reading in English is irrevocably destroyed.

We can study and learn foreign cultures in the Japanese language more rapidly and intensively than in a foreign language which we have not mastered. Of course, we can enjoy both language and culture together to some extent, but in order to encourage growth of our students' enthusiasm for reading in English letting them experience the joy of reading 'original' stories in English without the added burden of learning a new culture is extremely important.

It is very difficult to 'produce' competent readers in any language if they are not given a chance to become enchanted with reading in it.

Toru Matsumoto has been very successful in allowing his readers to become so contented and confident that they can read through original English novels fairly easily and with pleasure.

3. How Toru Matsumoto makes his readers feel comfortable while reading in English:

Two of my students at Hakuoh University, who had finished reading Hunted (1978) (the textbook for the 1989 sophomore class)^④ in one week, bor-

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rowed three other novels from my library during the next few months. One of them reports: “I read each of the four novels by Toru Matsumoto almost without a break on the train to and from the university.

The joy of reading in English and the attractiveness of those stories were so great that I went beyond my station several times !

The English language in his novels was not necessarily easy to me, but there was something within them that helped me to understand the stories very naturally: e.g. some contextual devices which helped me to enjoy trying to understand what was meant by those sophisticated expressions which were unique to English. His style and literary contents really helped me feel the pleasure of reading books in English...” (Mari Iwamoto)

Her comments remind me of my experience of working with him and two other linguists to write and edit Toru Matsumoto’s Dictionary of English Words and Phrases for Conversation (1970).

At first, Toru Matsumoto gave me, Editor in Chief, a general principle by which we would define English words and phrases only in easy English.

After long preparatory research, we hit upon an idea that we felt might be able to help the readers to understand the meaning of the index word or phrase. The reader could infer the meaning of the word or phrase by reading a very short ‘mini-conversation’ without having to read a direct definition or suffer through a Japanese translation. Examples of this idea are as follows:

afford: A: Let’s go to a movie and then out to dinner.

B: I can’t afford it today. I don’t get paid until Monday.

get a kick out of ~: A: Is that program any good?

B: Sure, I’m getting a big kick out of it.

inconsistent: A: She said she didn't go to New York last month.

B: She told me she did. That's funny. What she says is often inconsistent.

take one's time: A: Mother, just a moment, please.

B: There's no hurry. Take your time, Jean. ⑤

Toru Matsumoto, being an extremist in advocating his theory of 'Thinking in English to master English,' abhorred our habit of translating every English word and phrase into Japanese, and strictly adhered to this kind of 'direct method' to allow Japanese readers to enjoy English stories as they were. Therefore, the spirit of the 'mini-conversation' is seen in action everywhere in his novels.

Let me here quote some scenes from Hunted and Voice of Love® (published in 1980 right after the author's death) which the aforementioned students enjoyed reading.

4. English Stories to 'Wean' Japanese Readers:

I: Hunted

This is a story of two young people who happened to be pursued by two sets of laws, during the Vietnam War, in the United States: immigration and military conscription. The Chapters 1 and 2 go as follows:

Chapter 1

The story begins on a chilly afternoon in November. Kumiko, seated on a bench in a park facing a lake, seems lost in thought. Henry speaks to her.

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Henry: Hello.

Kumiko: Oh, are you speaking to me?

Henry: Yes.

I hope you don't mind.

We met at the party for foreign students last week, remember ?

It's cold out here, isn't it?

Kumiko does not answer. After seconds of awkward silence Henry speaks again.

Henry: Am I bothering you?

Kumiko: I'm sorry, but I must go now.

Henry: (pointing to a residence hall for women): You live there, don't you ?

May I walk with you?

Kumiko: Thank you, but I'd rather go home alone.

Henry: Since you don't seem to remember me, may I tell you my name again ?

It's Henry. Henry Kondo.

I'm a senior here.

You're a senior, too, aren't you ?

I'm from Seattle.

Now I've told you a little about myself.

Won't you tell me something about yourself ?

Kumiko: I'm sorry. Not now.

I have other things to think about.

Henry: May I see you again?

Kumiko: Yes, maybe, but please don't come with me now.

Henry: O.K. Forgive me for bothering you, but I do want to see you again.

Tomorrow is Saturday.

I must work all afternoon, but I'll be through by nine o'clock.

I'll be here on this bench a little after nine, rain or shine.

You don't have to come, but in case you want to talk to someone, I'll be here.

Do you think I'm a nut ?

Kumiko does not say anything. She gets up and leaves.

Chapter 2

The next day. After dusk it begins to snow. The temperature dips to below freezing. The time is 9:30 p.m. Kumiko finds Henry on the bench.

Kumiko: Hello.

Henry: Oh, hello.

Kumiko: You'll catch cold sitting there like that without an umbrella.

Henry: I'm tough. Besides, I don't have an umbrella.

Kumiko: Don't you?

Here, will you take my umbrella and go home?

And when you get home, take a hot bath and go to bed.

Henry: Thanks, but can't you at least have a cup of coffee with me?

There's a coffee shop right down the street.

Kumiko: I'm sorry, but it's late.

Besides, I still have some work to do.

Henry: All right, I'll go, but will you tell me why you came out in the snow ?

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Kumiko: I could see you from my window.

I didn't want you to catch cold on account of me.

Henry: That's very sweet of you.

Are you sure you can't join me for a cup of coffee?

Kumiko: I'm sorry, but I'm rather tired tonight.

Henry: O.K. then, give me your name and room number so I can return your umbrella.

Kumiko: Will you bring it back tomorrow morning, because I may need it?

Henry: You mean you will see me if I bring it back ?

What time ? Where ?

Kumiko: You'll see me on the front steps of Hayes Hall about eleven thirty.

Henry: Couldn't we meet, say, at eleven and have brunch together?

Kumiko: Eleven thirty, please.

Henry and Kumiko walk together towards Hayes Hall. Henry holds the umbrella in one hand, and with the other arm holds Kumiko firmly. She feels secure, even pleasant.

The Notes are only a few lines of explanation as follows:

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6 a nut a foolish, or funny character, usually a male
(American slang)

7 dip to sink

8 brunch late breakfast, a combination of breakfast and lunch

The story proceeds in that style; that is, mostly in conversation style with a few lines of narration and a lot of suspense. Being a draft evader, Henry Kondo, alias Mike Yamazaki or Al Lopez, flees from Seattle, Washington to a college town in the Midwest, where he meets and marries Kumiko, a Japanese student working towards her Master's degree in Education. Because of a complete discontinuation of financial support from Japan, Kumiko loses her student status, which means she cannot stay in the United States legally. They are soon approached by FBI agents. But a Christian minister shields Henry from them, and he drives towards the East and on to the Southernmost State of Florida, where he works as a Cuban gardener until he finally surrenders himself to the authorities upon his father's advice.

In spite of his manly decision to serve his time in prison, the District Attorney of Miami says with a smile, '...“So, in recognition of your voluntary surrender and with the full agreement of the Draft Board of the State of Washington, with whom we have been in touch, I, in the name of the United States Government, herewith issue you a full pardon and release you from military service. You are a free man.”He is no longer Al Lopez or Mike Yamazaki. He is Henry Kondo to everybody.’ (p. 145) I could not help but shout, “Bravo!”

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This medium-sized novel of 40 chapters, each chapter of which consists of 3 pages in average, is full of suspenseful ups and downs.

The author seems to be telling us in the last line of the story that in spite of lots of hardships this world is full of wonderful people.

It would not be improper to say that this story should be recommended reading for all Japanese college and university students because of its entertainment value and its positive attitude toward life.

It has been fifteen years since the Vietnam War ended, and yet ‘In

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America, the pain endures.' (The cover of TIME. April 30, 1990) ⑦

It is, therefore, no wonder that Hunted, first published in 1983, appeals to us even now.

II : Voice of Love

This novel is a middle school student's story of first love, and it is dedicated to the memories of the author's boyhood spent along the Usui River, Gun-ma Prefecture in 1920s. (Unfortunately the book with this story is now out of print.)

On the page facing the first chapter, a 16th century proverb is quoted, saying, "Love will find a way." The boy's love story starts as follows:

I was awoken by the noise of the *amado door* being opened by Father. He was usually the first one to rise. "Look, Yuzo!" he shouted. "It snowed during the night."

I quickly got out of my *futon bed* and dressed. Father was already shoveling snow in front of the house. I put on my boots and joined him.

"I'll clear the snow from the gate of our house to the corner of the street," he said.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Why don't you make a path to the entrance of your teacher's house?"

Father was referring to the music teacher at school, Hitomi Sasaki.

We worked nearly half an hour, and soon the job was finished. Both of us were exhausted and perspiring.

"Dad," I said. "Do you think she'll know we've cleared the snow for her?"

"Oh, I'm sure she will, but I didn't do it. You've done it," said Dad, smiling. "Come, let's go in the house. Breakfast must be ready. We mustn't keep Grandma waiting too long."

Father was right. The table was set, and Grandma was waiting, somewhat put out.

"What took you so long?" she asked. "You weren't shoveling snow for other people, were you?"

Father and I exchanged smiles, but said nothing.

"Let's eat, Son," said Dad. "By the way, I don't know what time I'll be home tonight, so don't wait up for me."

I knew what he meant. My father was a police officer. Although his duty was criminal investigation and vice control, when the weather was bad, the traffic department became shorthanded and he was often detained at the headquarters to help. Grandmother, however, did not trust him. I guess she did not trust men, in general. Now that my father was a bachelor again, he might use his job as an excuse to stay downtown overtime, she thought. I knew he was not that kind of a person, but grandmother had her own ideas. In fact I heard her grumble at one time, when he was late coming home, "All men are wolves."

Grandma was my mother's mother. My mother was her only child, and when she married Father, she came along to live with her married daughter.

My mother was a beautiful woman, but after she brought me into this world, she became tubercular and when I was five, she died. In those days tuberculosis was a fatal disease. She had

spent her final year at sanatorium.....

The Notes for the Chapter One go as follows :

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13	<i>amado</i>	a wooden shutter to protect the house from rain and wind
	<i>futon</i>	quilted Japanese bedding
	shoveling	digging with a shovel
	referring to	making reference to
	exhausted	very tired
	perspiring	sweating
	cleared the snow	freed from the snow
14	The table was set	the table was prepared for a meal
	put out	upset because of the words or actions for another
	wait up	not go to sleep and wait
	criminal investigation	an inquiry or examination of an act relating to crime
	vice control	regulation of evil conduct
	detained	held or kept in custody
	headquarters	' the center of operations
	in general	for the most part
	bachelor	an unmarried man
	grumble	murmur or mutter a complain
	tubercular	infected with tuberculosis
15	tuberculosis	an infectious disease characterized by wasting away of tissues, often in the lungs

sanatorium

a place where sick people go

Voice of Love is a story of the time prior to World War II, in 1920s in Japan. We have experienced many drastic changes in our daily lives, economically, politically, and even culturally. And yet, worshipping the Emperor and Empress's photo, deaths caused by tuberculosis, middle schools only for boys, etc. which are not common in present-day Japan, are not beyond young people's understanding.

In fact, these everyday things reminiscent of pre-war Japan seem to attract the attention of the young.

This novel in English consisting of 24 chapters of fairly dramatic scenes tells the story of a boy gifted with a beautiful voice and a music teacher who likes him very much. She reminds him of his deceased mother.

All of a sudden, the beautiful music teacher disappears, and the boy's search for her starts. After a couple of years, the search ends suddenly and dramatically with the organ music by the teacher out of nowhere, and the song by the boy;

*'But come ye back, when summer in the meadow,
And when the valley's hushed and white with snow,
And I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow,
O Danny Boy, O Danny Boy, I love you so!'*

5. Conclusion

Needless to say that those stories were primarily written for Japanese students, and it is quite natural for us to feel it necessary to have some notes in Japanese. But, as is mentioned before, the author was always against using our mother tongue to understand what was written or spoken in English. His conviction is that native Japanese speakers can and must stay in the 'sea'

of English as long as they are trying to learn to 'swim' in it.

Our mother tongue is, of course, important. But he seems to be telling us that we will not be 'weaned' forever, if we do not live on any food other than mother's milk.

Toru Matsumoto has been very successful in weaning the Japanese readers by making his stories in fairly easy English as interesting and sophisticated as possible.

The words used in his novels that are not ordinarily found in high school English textbooks are presented in such a way as to make it easy for average students to infer their meaning with or without the English-English notes.

Toru Matsumoto attempted through his works to give the Japanese readers the opportunity to enjoy reading novels in English. His dedication to this purpose is reflected in most of his works. I would like to introduce the rest of his novels in English one by one in my next articles.

Notes

- ① Matsumoto, Toru. Jituyo Eigo Eno Michi (The Way to Practical English). Eiyuu-sha, Tokyo. 1960
- ②..... The Seven Stars. Friendship Press, New York. 1964 and Eiyuu-sha, Tokyo. 1963.
- ③..... Friendship 1. Eiyuu-sha, Tokyo. 1964.
- ④..... Hunted. Eiyuu-sha, Tokyo. 1978.
- ⑤ Matsumoto, M., Izuka, S., Fukayama, I. Toru Matsumoto's Dictionary of English Words and Phrases for Conversation. Mikasa Shoboh, Tokyo. 1970.

- ⑥ Matsumoto, M. Zeppitsu Matsumoto Toru Sakuhin Shuu: The Last Works of Toru Matsumoto.
World Kyoh-iku Shuppan, Tokyo. 1980
- ⑦ The cover of TIME (magazine). April 30, 1990. Tokyo, Japan.
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A List of Toru Matsumoto's Novels and Poems in English

1. A Brother Is A Stranger. The John Day Company, New York. 1946.
2. The Seven Stars. (listed above)
3. I Attacked Pearl Harbor. (translated from Kazuo Sakamaki's Japanese story, Horyo Dai-ichigoh. Association Press, New York. 1946.
4. Only Yesterday (poems) (Matsumoto Toru Eigo Shishuu). Eiyuu-sha, Tokyo. 1967.
5. Nancy and George. NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation). Tokyo, Japan. 1968.
6. The Visitor. Mikasa Shoboh. Tokyo, Japan. 1975.
7. Death of a College President. Eiyuu-sha. Tokyo, Japan. 1977.
8. Hunted. (listed above)
9. Voice of Love. (listed above)
10. Future to Build. (Matsumoto Toru Sakuhin Shuu ②). World Kyohiku Shuppan. Tokyo, Japan. 1980.
11. Sun and the Thistle. (Matsumoto Toru Sakuhin Shuu ③). World Kyohiku Shuppan. Tokyo, Japan. 1980.

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P.S.

Most of his NHK radio conversation textbooks (more than two hundred volumes) contain stories written by Toru Matsumoto. He really was 'a writer' in English.

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