

“Mother Tongue”

Amy Tan

Born in California in 1952 to Chinese immigrant parents, Amy Tan spent her childhood moving from place to place and often switching schools. She lost her father when she was only 15 years old, and as a result, much of her writing focuses on mother-daughter relationships, which are often fictionalized versions of her own life. Here Tan explores how her mother’s command of English impacted many aspects of her life both as a child, and now as an adult.

Vocabulary...

fascinated (v)

evoke (v)

transcribed (v)

belies (v)

vivid (adj)

wince (v)

ashamed (adj)

empirical (adj)

adolescent (adj)

impeccable (adj)

benign (adj)

budge (v)

insular (adj)

envison (v)

Reading Questions...

1. How does Tan feel about people referring to her mother’s English as “broken” or “fractured”? Why does she feel this way?

2. How is Tan’s mother treated by native English speakers? Why?

Discussion Questions...

1. What does Tan mean when she says there are many “Englishes”? Do you speak more than one English? Why might it be important to acknowledge the existence of multiple “Englishes”?

2. Why is Tan becoming an author such a big deal? What did people expect her to do? Why? How does this relate back to her mother?

Activities and Assignments...

1. Tan presents a story told by her mother in her mother’s own words as an example for the reader. Tan explains that while some people say they can understand almost everything her mother says, others claim they can barely make sense of it. What about you? Try to translate that section of the text (the 6th paragraph) into Standard Written English. How much of it can you understand? What parts are difficult? Why?

2. Do you speak to your family the same way you speak to your friends? Do you speak to your friends the same way you speak to your professors? Think of something that you need to tell all three groups of people (family, friends, professors), and then write it three ways—one for each group. What changes from group to group? Why?



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