

Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue"

In Amy Tan's personal essay, "Mother Tongue" (pp. 9-14 in Course Pack / handout), she looks at her mother's use of language and how this influenced how people treated her. Beyond the personal element in this essay, we can see how the author comments on society, language and even other larger issues (like standardized testing, educational stereotyping, etc.) Tan also discusses her mother's voice as a source of inspiration for her own writing.

Our goal in this group work exercise is to understand Tan's argument and see how a successful writer can use the 'personal voice' to comment on larger ideas and themes.

● In groups of 3:

• First, read the essay after you look over the questions (pre-reading) below. (7 - 10 minutes)

1) Throughout this essay, Amy Tan uses personal experience (stories, dialogue, incidents) from her mother's life as 'evidence.' **As a group, choose 2 incidents that seem original or effective to you and describe them (also write down the page numbers).** Why is this evidence effective for the reader?

2) Besides the personal story of Amy Tan's mother, this essay also comments on other issues in American life, as well as the immigrant experience of living between two cultures in language. **As a group, try to decide on what the main argument is. (There are several valid choices.) Write down one of Tan's arguments and explain it in a sentence or two.** Is there a place in the essay where the author makes her argument clear?

3) Since Amy Tan is a bestselling and successful author, did it surprise you that she had trouble with writing? **What 'evidence' does Tan give to show how she grew as a writer? Choose one 'step' on Tan's process in becoming a successful writer.**

4) Finally, how successfully does Tan use personal experience to 'frame' her essay? **Do you think she generalizes her experience of her own and her mother's life fairly to comment on larger issues? Why or why not?** Try to come up with a specific answer here. **Challenge Question: What is the 'tone' of the ending of the essay?** (Optimistic, pessimistic or something else?) How well does Tan reconcile her mother's difficulty with English with her own life? Is Tan's mother's English actually "fractured," after all? Why or why not?

• **Reporting Out** -- We will spend a few minutes collecting the responses from #1 to #4 (to the ideas in bold) to see what you have discovered. Two 'reporters' on each team should be ready to give your answers.

(~25 min.)