

The Anti-Racist Writing Classroom

Teaching Translingual:

Lesson plans and suggested writing assignments for exploring code meshing and linguistic difference

Part II. Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue"

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About the Text: "Mother Tongue"

Amy Tan is an American writer whose novel *The Joy Luck Club* cemented her status as a widely-read explorer of mother/daughter relationships and Chinese-American identity. Tan has been criticized for presenting portraits of Chinese culture that are overly stereotypical, though she draws on her own experience and remains a prominent figure in American letters.

Tan's essay "Mother Tongue" addresses her understanding of the multiple Englishes she adopts to communicate with and for her mother. This essay is easily accessible for first-year students and can serve as a springboard for discussion of the variety of ways we communicate with each other. Tan also gestures toward the social implications and consequences of choosing which English to use.

Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" has been widely anthologized. It originally appeared in 1990:

Amy Tan. "Mother Tongue." *The Threepenny Review*, no. 43, 1990, p. 7.

Suggested Lesson

Before you begin:

- Briefly introduce idea of different Englishes. A personal anecdote about codeswitching might help students to understand the concept as it impacts their daily lives.
- As a class, brainstorm different Englishes, written or spoken, that students either use or encounter in their daily lives. You may choose to write student contributions on the board.
- Once a sufficient number of ideas are generated, ask students to reflect on why they use different modes of communication. Ask:
 - What are we trying to say when we choose a style of communication?
 - How do people treat you differently when you use a different English?

Preperatory writing:

- Ask students to write for five minutes about the role of different Englishes in their own lives. Think:
 - Where did you learn how to speak? From whom?
 - Where did you learn how to write? From whom?
- When time is up, ask students to share with their neighbor for a brief (~3 minute) conversation.
- Students who are comfortable are invited to share with the class.

Suggested Lesson cont'

Reading the text:

- Instructor reads first, then calls on students popcorn style to work through the text.
- Pause after each new idea to process as a class and check for comprehension.

Teacher tip: Reading together ensures that everyone has read the material and everyone has a chance to ask questions. Consider reading a short essay in class instead of assigning for homework!

Processing the text:

The following discussion questions can either be posed before or during reading:

- What "Englishes" does Amy Tan utilize?
- What do you think about the terms "broken English" or "limited English"? What does the author seem to think about them?
- Why do the people in this essay treat Tan's mother differently because of the way she speaks? What's going on there?
- If someone is treated differently because of the way they speak, what happens when they write in a different English?
- How does that last question impact our project as a writing class?

Suggested Assignment

For homework, invite students to impersonate themselves! Ask them to identify an English that they use frequently that is NOT the same as the English they usually use for essays. They might choose to write the way they speak at home, the way they text with friends, or even as though they were captioning an image on social media! Students will use this English to write a brief dramatic monologue on a subject of their choice. In "Mother Tongue," Amy Tan reproduces a passage of her mother's speech. You can use this as an example.

Suggested requirements:

- At least 250 words
- Address the following questions:
 - When do you use this English?
 - With whom do you use this English?
 - When do you NOT use this English?
 - With whom do you NOT use this English?
 - Give this English a name! What would you call it?

In-class follow up:

On the day this assignment is due, allow students five minutes to freewrite in response to following question: What English did you choose, and what was it like to write a college assignment in this voice? Then invite students to share their experience with their neighbor. They can share their reflection or their assignment. Everyone chooses an insight to share with the class.