“Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan

Response to Text Questions:  
1. Why does Tan open her essay by stating, “I am not a scholar of English or literature,” then state in the next paragraph, “I am a writer.” What is the difference between a scholar and a writer?

2. In paragraph 3, Tan writes fairly long sentence until she writes, “My mother was in the room.” Why is this sentence shorter? What is the effect of the short sentence on the reader?

3. Throughout her essay, Tan uses dialogue, the written reproduction of speech or conversation. Why does she do this? What is the effect of the dialogue? Which sentences of dialogue do you find especially effective, and why?

4. In paragraph 7 Tan writes, “That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.” How was the effect of her mother’s English positive, and how was it negative?

5. Why does Tan put quotation marks around “broken” and “limited”?

6. How does Tan use humor as she contrasts the two Englishes in the telephone conversation she records? How does the tone change when Tan shifts to the hospital scene?

7. Why does Tan believe that envisioning a reader—specifically her mother—encouraged her to write more authentically?

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