

English is my 'Mother Tongue'

Chikako Nagayama

English is my 'mother tongue'. But I am not a fluent speaker, nor a flawless writer of English. I was born, brought up and educated in Japan. Nevertheless, I can say English constitutes the main part of me. A lot of my time has been spent struggling with English. First, I was afraid of it, and next, I came to hate it. Today, I seem to have conquered such feelings because I am using English in daily conversations, but still now, I am on my way to reconciliation with English. Because my mother is an English teacher, who was too strict and cruel in her child's education.

She started to train me when I was 9 years old. We used a series of drills and recorded tapes. Maybe it was not such a difficult practice—just to associate English words with pictures such like 'apple' or 'Tom', but to me, it was painful and confusing. One time, she took me to the riverside and requested me to pronounce alphabets following her in a loud voice. The trainer was so strict, and corrected her student again and again and again until she was completely satisfied: '[ei]', '[ei]', '[ei]', '[ei]'... I still remember that obedient girl often cried in such practices because she couldn't understand at all why she had to repeat that thing. It felt like an eternal torture. After I started to learn English at school at the age of 12, the volunteer tutor sometimes scolded me when my mark was not enough—even 97 points was not enough. Indeed, I was expected to get a perfect mark every time, not only in English but every subject.

Until recently, I have had a complicated feeling when I studied English. It was like a heavy stone in my stomach. Fortunately, owing to good teachers, I could enjoy learning English in class. But, at home, I had to overcome the depressive feeling while I was looking up words in the English dictionary. It might have been an oppressed feeling of anger and hate. After entering high school, I came to skip the preparation for English classes, but ironically, English was the subject that I could really rely on in terms of my marks.

As time goes by, I came to understand my mother. My mother was always complaining about her upbringing. She was adopted to her biological father's brother and his wife. She was supposed to inherit her step parents' house and name, therefore, they tried to keep her at hand. They didn't allow her to leave their home to go to university, although she eagerly wanted to go to Ochanomizu Univ, one of the most prestigious women's universities in Tokyo. Unwillingly, she attended and took B.A. in English literature at Toyama University, but its education did not satisfy her. She said to me, repeatedly, "I used to go to the rooftop of the school building and read an English book alone. The class was so boring and the students were so stupid. Classes in my high school were much more difficult and intellectual." I had been listening to my mother's explicit and implicit message: Toyama University is not good. You have to get out of this prefecture.

Actually, the high school, which my mother and I graduated from, has been one of the most competitive schools in Toyama prefecture and produced numerous graduates of Tokyo University, the most respected and competitive university in Japan. Universities in Japan are stratified rigidly in terms of deviation value, and in most

cases, 'good' ones are located in big and attractive cities, such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. On the contrary, Toyama is a simple rural region that is famous for agriculture, fishery and larger houses – yes, we have a vast land, at least – and a lot of industrious students in Toyama tend to leave their home for higher education.

As a matter of fact, after I entered Kyoto University, that is, the 'second competitive' public university, I gradually found out the ranking of universities does not represent its quality of education. And it was very hard to find a nice boyfriend in the herd of young naïve tyrants... However, such a radical and challenging fact was often ignored in my high school! We were almost like chessmen: the students with high marks were, without exception, recommended by teachers to go to Tokyo university. And, in fact, it is a graduate of Tokyo University who will be a successful politician or a president of a large company and surely contribute to 'development' of Toyama prefecture.

At the General Test, a requisite for public universities, I scored better than my mother; 197 to 186. Then I passed the entrance exam of Kyoto University, and I felt like I finally defeated my mother. The revenge against my mother was accomplished. Well done.

Several years later, however, she told me, " I was anxious about your health because you worked too hard. I didn't mean to force you to pass that difficult university. I was just hoping that you could enter any school that fits you." At this time, and at last, I realized that I had only overreacted to her expectation to me. Well, she could have accepted me if I had done something else, probably. Then I started to live my own life. This is my life, not hers.

And what happened? I am now in Toronto and preparing for my study in the graduate school at the University of Toronto. English is one of my necessities, that connects me to people and helps me to build up new way of thinking. Though, I might be still obsessed by a dream of 'perfection' of English.

As for my mother, she has also changed. She once told me that her dream had been to be a wife of a diplomatist (not to be a diplomatist by herself). She always wanted to go abroad. Although she has devoted her whole energy into earning money and rising her children for twenty-five years, she finally flew to England and attended an English course last summer. I am very glad to see that she lives a life of her own now. She has moved to technical college and started experimental education of English. She also sometimes writes academic papers both in Japanese and English, and asks me to check them.

So, is it peaceful reconciliation between mother and daughter? – No way!

Her writing really makes me upset: "What on earth does this sentence mean! It is not coherent! And this! And this! Tell me! " I easily forget to show consideration to this disgusting writer and start to accuse her. She becomes stiff as if she was a schoolchild scolded by her teacher: "Well, I don't know..."

And our life goes on.