Name _____ Date _____

A Theme Shaped by Specific Details: My Mother's Second Language

Directions: Read the story carefully, paying close attention to small details such as words, objects and habits. Then answer each question, checking every choice against the exact words of the story before you decide.

My Mother's Second Language

The first winter in this country, my mother labeled our apartment. Yellow notes appeared on everything we owned, REFRIGERATOR on the refrigerator, WINDOW on the window and DRAWER on each of the three drawers beside the stove, and every morning before work she walked from room to room, touching each note and saying its word out loud, slowly, the way a person tests each stair in the dark.

I was ten, and the notes embarrassed me. Whenever friends came over, I peeled them off and hid them in a cupboard, and the next morning my mother put every one of them back without a word.

By the time I was fifteen, the notes were gone, but the habits had stayed. Before every phone call, she wrote out what she planned to say on an index card and practiced it twice at the kitchen table, her finger moving under each line. She kept a notebook of words she had heard on the radio and did not yet own: *reluctant*, *gravel*, *nevertheless*. Her English was careful and correct, and it was slow, and I was not patient with slow.

So I helped. At the pharmacy, at the bank and on the phone with our landlord, I jumped in whenever she paused, finishing her sentences so quickly that people began to look past her and speak to me instead. I thought I was saving her time.

One afternoon at the pharmacy, she stopped in the middle of a question about her prescription, searching for a word, and I said it for her. The pharmacist nodded and turned to me. My mother was quiet for two blocks on the walk home, and then she said, "If you always finish my sentences, I will never find out how they end."

I did not know what to say, so for once I said nothing at all.

That night I heard her on the phone with her sister, who still lived in the city where they were born. She was speaking her first language, and she was fast. She told a long story that made her sister laugh so hard I could hear it through the phone, argued about something with real heat, and sang two lines of an old song, all without stopping once to search for a word. Standing in the dark hallway, I listened to a woman I had never really met.

The next week I bought a pack of yellow notes. I asked my mother how to spell the word for refrigerator in her language, wrote it on a note and stuck it to the refrigerator door. In the morning, I found that she had corrected my spelling in neat blue ink and left the note exactly where it was.

I stood in front of it and said the word out loud, slowly. She did not help me. She only waited, smiling, until I found the end of it myself.

1. "My Mother's Second Language" opens with the yellow notes that the mother sticks on everything in the apartment and with her habit of "touching each note and saying its word out loud, slowly" every morning before work. What does this opening detail show about her?

A. She is trying to teach the narrator to speak English.

B. She is determined and patient about learning, practicing her new words every morning.

C. She is forgetful and needs notes to remind her where things are kept.

D. She is decorating the new apartment to make it feel more cheerful.

2. When friends come over, the ten-year-old narrator peels the notes off and hides them, and "the next morning my mother put every one of them back without a word." What does her response reveal about her?

A. She quietly keeps to her way of learning, even though her child is embarrassed by it.

B. She is too angry to speak to the narrator about it.

C. She agrees with the narrator that the notes are embarrassing.

D. She never noticed that the notes had been taken down.

3. The narrator says that the mother kept a notebook of words she had heard on the radio and "did not yet own" (*reluctant*, *gravel*, *nevertheless*). What does the phrase "did not yet own" suggest about the way she thinks of new words?

A. She sees each word as something she will make her own through effort, and "yet" shows that she expects to.

B. She dislikes the words she hears on the radio and plans to avoid them.

C. She already knows these words well and uses them every day.

D. She cannot afford to buy the books in which the words appear.

4. The narrator calls the mother's English "careful and correct," then adds, "and it was slow, and I was not patient with slow." A paragraph later the narrator says, "I thought I was saving her time." How do these sentences prepare for the story's theme?

A. They show that the narrator judged the mother only by her speed and believed the help was kind, a belief that the rest of the story calls into question.

B. They show that the mother had asked the narrator to speak for her.

C. They show that the mother's English was full of mistakes that needed fixing.

D. They show that the narrator wanted to hurt the mother's feelings on purpose.

5. At the pharmacy, the narrator supplies the word the mother is searching for, and then "The pharmacist nodded and turned to me." What does this small detail show about the narrator's help?

A. It proves that the narrator understands the prescription better than the mother does.

B. It shows that the pharmacist is rude to every customer.

C. It pushes the mother out of her own conversation, since the pharmacist now speaks to the narrator instead of to her.

D. It shows that the mother is relieved to let the narrator take over.

6. On the walk home, the mother tells the narrator, "If you always finish my sentences, I will never find out how they end." What does she mean?

A. She wants the narrator to stop coming to the pharmacy with her.

B. She needs to work through her own sentences in order to learn, so the narrator's help, however kindly meant, takes that chance away.

C. She is complaining that the narrator talks too much at dinner.

D. She is admitting that she will never learn to speak English well.

7. Which of these statements expresses a theme of the story, rather than naming a topic, summarizing events or repeating a single detail?

A. The mother writes out every phone call on an index card before she makes it.

B. Learning a new language takes patience, and people help a learner most by giving that person time to find the words.

C. A mother learning a new language in a new country

D. A mother labels her apartment, and years later her child begins to learn her first language.

8. Late in the story, the narrator overhears the mother on the phone with her sister, telling a long story, arguing "with real heat" and singing, "all without stopping once to search for a word." How does the line "I listened to a woman I had never really met" refine the story's theme?

A. It suggests that the mother was only pretending to struggle with English.

B. It shows that the mother's slow English hides a quick, funny and forceful self, so judging her by her speed had meant seeing only part of her.

C. It reveals that the mother loves her sister more than she loves her own child.

D. It shows that the mother has given up on learning English.

9. Which two details from the end of the story repeat the mother's habits from her first winter in the country? Select two.

☐ A. The narrator stands in front of the note and says the word out loud, slowly.

☐ B. The narrator asks the mother how to spell the word.

☐ C. The narrator writes a word on a yellow note and sticks it to the refrigerator door.

☐ D. The mother waits, smiling, without helping.

☐ E. The mother corrects the spelling in neat blue ink.

10. The story ends, "She did not help me. She only waited, smiling, until I found the end of it myself." How does this ending refine the theme?

A. It shows that the mother refuses to help because she is still upset about the pharmacy.

B. It shows the mother giving the narrator the patience that the narrator once failed to give her, so real help can mean letting a learner find the end without help.

C. It shows that the narrator decides the new language is too hard to learn.

D. It shows that the mother wants the narrator to stop speaking English at home.