

Introduction for the Teacher

The Story

The heart of *Trials and Errors* is 42 conversations in which a young married couple adjusts to life in the United States. She (Ann) is an American; he (JD) is not. They have met and married in his country, where he was a successful journalist. To survive financially and build toward a future in the U.S., JD will be forced to take a job on a construction site, while Ann goes to work in a hospital as a nurse's aide. By the end of their story they will have met many challenges (Trials) and survived them. JD begins his venture with basic but limited English and is still not completely aware of the way things are done in this new culture. Along the way, he struggles with English and the many cultural differences. Inevitably, he makes mistakes (Errors). However, with Ann's help he learns, their marriage becomes stronger, and they begin a family.

The Language

The focus of the material in the book is colloquial conversation. The vocabulary is that of the topics and themes of everyday life. The grammar is based on the sentence structures that are used in everyday conversation. The majority of the sentences are normal subject-verb-object word order and normal question word order. There are, however, instances of compound and complex sentences with dependent and embedded clauses. As the material represents conversation, an attempt has been made to reflect the discourse features of informal conversation. There are interjections, space-fillers, exclamations, elisions, rejoinders, and other discourse markers. The recorded conversations on the CD also feature the natural stress, rhythm, and intonation of North American English, although JD's pronunciation and language level are those of an intermediate learner of English.

The Audience

The linguistic level of the book is, although challenging, suitable for intermediate and advanced learners of English. In general, it will appeal to young adult and adult learners, and especially to those who have immigrated to the U.S. Ann and JD's experience as a bicultural couple will also give learners opportunities to discuss their own cross-cultural experiences.

The Book

There are 14 “Acts” in the book, each act having three “scenes.” The scenes each have somewhat different settings, but they are unified by a theme. Each act is eight pages long. The first page is an introduction to the following scenes. The next six pages are the three scenes, each scene being about one and a half pages long. The last page of the act is a “Discussion and Improvisation” page. The discussion is intended to summarize the act and engage the learners in a discussion that makes the story relevant to their own lives. The improvisation further explores the linguistic and cultural content and encourages the learners to explore their own creativity.

The CDs

The book can be used without the CDs. However, one of the distinctive features of the recorded conversations is that JD makes mistakes. For the learners listening to the conversations, one of the challenges is to detect JD’s errors and, with the help of peers and the teacher, correct his English. Therefore, listening to the CD is not just a matter of practicing listening comprehension by following along; it allows the class an opportunity to engage in an authentic error-correction activity. The transcript of the CD with JD’s errors is available in a separate Teacher’s Guide, along with other supporting material.

User’s Guide

There are many ways to use this material, and every user should develop procedures that will work for them. The material can be used in class on a regular daily basis, or periodically, such as once a week. It may also be used by individual learners, mainly for self-study. It can also be used as a combination of in- and out-of-class work. For example, the first page of each act can be introduced and discussed in class. The students can then be assigned to read and/or listen to the first scene in the act for homework. The next session back in class can then begin with a question-and-answer session clarifying aspects of the conversation which may not be completely understood. Finally, after all three scenes, the class can engage in the discussion and improvisation. Although teaching/learning situations vary considerably, it is likely that each act will require four hours of work – one hour for each scene, and one hour for the discussion and improvisation.

A basic procedure is outlined below

1. Introduce the act by having the learners read the paragraph that summarizes the three scenes. Check the learners' understanding with spot questions. WH questions are effective: "Who is Tom?" "Where will Ann and JD live?" "How does Tom help JD?" etc.
2. Preview the short descriptions of each scene so that the learners have a global understanding of the context of the scenes.
3. Engage the learners in a discussion of the question at the bottom of the page. This prepares them for the "trials" they will encounter in the scenes.
4. Have the learners listen to the first scene on the CD and have them follow along in the book. At this time, do not ask the learners to identify JD's errors, although some learners may be noting them on the script. Go back through the scene with the printed script, pausing for questions and asking questions until you feel the learners have a good grasp of the story line.
5. Have the learners "perform" the scene in small groups. There may be unfamiliar words, such as "embracing," "enthusiastic," "weakly," "uncomfortable," etc., in the stage directions so it may be necessary to first be sure they understand the directions. Ask the learners to work on being expressive and dramatic. Go from group to group to encourage and model the lines. After the learners have attempted to read with expression, it may be useful to return to the CD and have them listen to how the lines are said.
6. Play the CD again, having the learners listen for JD's errors. You can have them tap a pencil on the desk when they think they have heard an error. Then work with the class to correct the error. For your information, the complete script with the errors underlined is available in the Teacher's Guide.
7. After all the scenes have been worked on, do the discussion and improvisation page. The directions for conducting these activities are on the page itself.

Teacher's Guide

As mentioned above, the complete tapescript with JD's errors is in the Teacher's Guide, along with additional suggestions for using the material.

Trials and Errors Prologue

Background Sketches



JD

JD worked for many years in his home country as a journalist and then as an investigative reporter. His work was exciting, even dangerous, and he loved it. He had a large, loving, and supportive family. When he met and fell in love with Ann, an American, he had to make many decisions. Should he marry her and leave his family? Could he give up his work? They decided to marry, and eventually they moved to the United States to live with her family in the town of Springfield. Now in the U.S., JD misses his work and his family a great deal, but Ann supports him. He knows he has many skills, and he knows that over time he will figure out how to make a good life. Fortunately, JD can laugh at himself. He will experience many trials and he will make some errors, but he is a hard worker and he gets along well with people.



Ann

Ann is an American who loves to travel the world. Her first taste of this came right after college when she went to Africa for two years as a health worker for the Peace Corps. This experience brought her to another country where she worked for another two years and met JD. She found JD one of the most confident and interesting men she had ever met, and she decided to marry him. At first, they lived in his country, but it was too hard for her to find work, so they decided to take their chances and move to the United States. Neither of them had managed to save much money, and so when they arrive in the United States they have to live with her parents. Ann has career ambitions to move from a nurse's aide to a nurse.



Tom

Ann's father is a good man, who has worked hard and rarely left Springfield, his hometown. He is retired, but has many contacts from his work life. Ann is his only child, and he didn't like to see her leave and go so far away. He doesn't understand her interest in all those other countries. He had been very worried about her as she traveled far away. He was not impressed when she married in a foreign country and he and his wife, Catherine, could not even attend the wedding. When Ann decided to move back home, he was happy to have her back, but not so excited about JD, whom he does not know and does not yet trust. On the other hand, Tom wants to support his son-in-law, and he will do his best to make it all work.



Catherine

Catherine, Ann's mom, is a great mom. She loves everyone. She is very excited to have Ann home, and immediately trusts and likes JD. JD also likes her, and it helps JD to know that she likes him. Secretly, Catherine wishes she too could have traveled the world like her daughter, Ann, and she admires her for her courage. She understands how hard it must be for JD to leave his family and his country; she does everything she can to make him feel at home. She is a great cook and an expert on her hometown. She knows how to do many practical things and connect with people. Catherine is working on her husband, Tom, to soften his mistrust of JD.



George

George is a friend of Ann's father, Tom. As the best contractor in the Springfield area, George is a very busy man. As a result, he almost always feels hassled, and he can be a bit gruff. Nonetheless, George is a good guy, who has no use for anyone or anything that doesn't contribute to making his projects go smoothly. For this reason, he is reluctant to hire JD, because JD is inexperienced. However, as a favor to Tom and because of JD's positive attitude, George takes a chance and hires JD temporarily. Over the course of the story, George develops a fatherly attitude toward JD, holding JD to a high standard, but protecting him as well.



Gary

Gary is a very good construction worker. He is reliable, skilled, and strong, and George depends upon him. Gary is from Springfield and has never left it. He graduated from Springfield High School. He learned his construction skills from his father and is passing on his skills to his own two sons. His wife recently died of breast cancer, and he is raising his two teenagers on his own. Because of the recent loss of his wife, his attitudes are harsher and more bitter than usual. He is a proud American, and he would be happier if all foreigners would go back to their own countries. He does not like it when JD, a foreigner, arrives on the scene, and George shows a personal interest in him. At first, he doesn't like JD and has no trouble expressing his opinions.

The Setting



The story takes place in a small town in the heart of the United States, Springfield (population 30,000). The people of Springfield are proud of their neighborhood libraries and recreational facilities, and very proud of their hospital and community college. Ann's parents were born in this town and know everyone. Ann was born in Springfield, too. Most of the neighbors are friendly toward JD, although few of them have friends among the many people who are moving to Springfield from other countries. They don't quite know what to make of the changes in their town. While there is little hostility toward the newcomers, there isn't a terribly warm welcome either. Springfield practices a "wait and see" approach toward immigrants, and yet it still tries to earn its good reputation for being "warm and friendly." JD feels welcome, most of the time.

