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Book review: Corpus-based Classroom Activities

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McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2005)*. *Touchstone 1-4: From Corpus to Course Book*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
(*Level 2 workbook by Susan Rivers and Georgiana Farnoaga)

In the past 20 years, corpus linguistics has expanded rapidly in the areas of second language research and teaching. Its largest contribution to date has probably been in the area of vocabulary; for example, the teaching of collocations, semantic prosody, and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), which dominate today's vocabulary classrooms and textbooks, are the product of corpus studies. Corpus materials are beneficial to learners in that they are based on actual language usage; examples, although they may be edited or adapted, are a reflection of authentic language; similarly, the syllabus is informed by frequency information, providing learners exposure to useful language.

Touchstone is one of the first integrated textbook series to be based on corpus studies. The language presented in the *Touchstone* series is taken from the Cambridge International Corpus of North American English (CICNAE), 700 million words of written and spoken English. The corpus-based emphasis in the *Touchstone* series distinguishes it in a number of ways from other series typically used in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms. The most notable advantage is that the text is able to focus strongly on grammatical structures used in conversation, something not often present in other texts, which usually emphasize vocabulary acquisition through free discussion. Further, despite this concentration on grammatical structure, *Touchstone* also effectively incorporates the same vocabulary topics/words as other speaking/listening texts, such as *Great Ideas* and *Let's Talk*.

Touchstone is a four-level integrated skills series aimed at adult and young adult English language learners from the basic to intermediate level. Each level in the series includes a student book (around 150 pages), which comes with a self-study CD/CD-Rom for additional interactive listening, speaking, and vocabulary activities for each unit. The student book is also available in two parts, Student Book A which contains units 1-6 from the full student book and Student Book B which contains units 7-12 from the full student book. A workbook (around 100 pages) and a teacher's edition are also available for each level, along with a Class Audio program and Web Site activities. The Class Audio program contains recordings instructors will need to play in class; both tapes and cds are available. Web activities include a teacher support site (<http://www.cambridge.org/us/esl/Touchstone/teacher/>) and, according to this link (<http://www.cambridge.org/us/esl/touchstone/studentsupport.htm>), a student site will be available sometime this year.

Touchstone 1 is made up of 12 units with typical topics such as "Shopping", "Free Time", "In Class", and "All About You." Each unit is 10 pages, broken into four lessons and a vocabulary notebook page. Lesson A presents the main language structure of the unit and introduces the unit's vocabulary and a pronunciation, listening, or speaking activity. Lesson B focuses on the unit vocabulary and has additional language structure exercises. Lesson C focuses on conversation management skills, introducing conversation strategies. Lesson D is the reading and writing portion of the unit, with reading materials such as magazine articles, newspaper classified ads, pages from websites, and restaurant guides. Writing assignments progressing from short sentences to short texts include making a family tree, giving advice, writing a restaurant review, and keeping a personal journal. The vocabulary notebook page helps student organize and use vocabulary. The end of the student book also has "Free Talk" activities for each unit, (although it would seem more

useful to include the "Free Talk" at the end of every unit). These "Free Talk" activities are designed to encourage students to participate in free-speaking activities in which they can practice the language from the unit and includes activities such as board games, class surveys, pair work, and group work. Every third unit in the student book is a two-page review.

When we used Book 1 in the classroom, the focus on structure seemed to help students feel more confident about communicating naturally in an English-speaking environment. Using the text to discuss the frequency and appropriateness with which American English speakers use particular phrases seemed to satisfy students who often experience frustration at their inability to use "real" English outside the classroom. They seemed pleased to learn structures that they could trust would occur frequently with native English speakers. As teachers sometimes often feel frustration in their intuitional attempts to provide students with relevant conversational phrases, this text provides instructors with confidence to guide students in accurately using phrases in English that they most are likely to hear all around them.

The teacher's edition is especially helpful and easy to use. It contains in-depth lesson plans with clear and interesting methods to present, practice, and review the language in each lesson, along with photocopiable quizzes, mid-term and final exams, audio scripts of all materials, and an answer key for the workbook. The teacher's edition also includes a list of the top 500 spoken words from *the CICNAE*.

The student workbook, which includes two pages for every unit, with vocabulary exercises and a combination of grammar and conversation strategy exercises, is another effective supplemental tool of the series. The workbook activities make productive homework assignments by helping students revisit the learned conversational structures outside of class and providing an opportunity to review the structures again in the following class.

Another advantage in the corpus-based nature of the series is the influence on students' affective factors toward a beginning speaking class. In an EAP curriculum, college students and professionals often feel limited by being "forced" to study and talk about what they may perceive to be simplistic vocabulary topics. The research behind the corpus-based activities, as they are presented in this series, may establish a "trust factor" with students, helping them see the relevance of this speaking class in their future academic or professional lives. The addition of structural scaffolding to the usual vocabulary topics in this series not only has a positive pedagogical impact but also may allow students to feel that the course more satisfactorily relates to their personal goals. The *Touchstone* series is a truly effective series, not simply because it is based on corpus data, but because it presents this data in a user-friendly manner to both teachers and students that maximizes the effectiveness of instruction.

References:

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