
Book Review

Touchstone 4

Michael McCarthy, Jeanne McCarten, and Helen Sandiford.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2006. (pp. x + 128).
¥2,710.

ISBN 0-521-66593-0. Workbook. Teacher's Edition. Audio CD/CD-ROM or Cassettes

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Has it really taken this long? Computational analyses of spoken language were underway in the 1980s, and Sinclair published his early work on corpora in 1991. Yet even today, so few ELT speaking/listening textbooks incorporate findings from spoken language corpus research. In fact, the language forms that students usually encounter derive from writers' or editors' assessments of which English structures and vocabulary are most useful – and not from spoken language as it occurs in the real world.

What is most refreshing about the four-level Touchstone series is its focus on authentic conversational pragmatics. The authors have mined the North American English section of the Cambridge International Corpus for frequently used “chunks” (multiword units) that serve pragmatic functions, such as discourse marking, politeness, and vagueness (McCarthy, 2004).

Indeed, few textbooks highlight pragmatic facets of natural conversation as well as Touchstone. A sampling of these features,

taken from Touchstone 4, includes summarizing to show agreement or understanding (A: A lot of bands sound the same to me. B: I know. They're all alike.) (p. 16); using "of course" to introduce a not unexpected response (A: So, when you're living here, do you miss home? B: Um, I don't miss too much... I miss my family, of course...) (p. 26); and repeating ideas to make meaning clear (I've had some weird dreams. Really weird dreams. They're always scary ones.) (p. 58).

Each volume in the Touchstone series is divided into 12 units, and every unit has four two-page lessons with a review section after every three units. Lesson A presents grammar points in realistic contexts, followed by grammar awareness activities. Lesson B introduces new vocabulary, combines it with grammar practice, and includes a pronunciation point focusing on suprasegmentals (rhythm, stress, linking, elision). Oddly, for a book otherwise brimming with authentic language forms, the dialogues in these two sections are delivered in a cleaned up, unnaturally hypercorrect variety of spoken English.

Where Touchstone really stands out is in its conversation strategies, two of which are introduced in Lesson C. For example, in Unit 1 of Touchstone 4, the first strategy shows how shifting into present tense at a key moment in a story can intensify dramatic effect ("We were on this trail, and it was getting dark. Then Bryan says, 'Where are we?'" (p. 6). A second, related, strategy illustrates the way important things can be highlighted by using this and these (cf. "We were on a trail." vs. "We were on this trail.") (p. 7). Both strategies show students how to increase the immediacy of their speech.

Lesson D provides reading and writing practice, using modified authentic sources, with further work on vocabulary. The writing tasks, however, supply only brief models without providing any substantial skill instruction. Each unit ends with a Vocabulary Notebook page that expands vocabulary on the unit topic and provides learning techniques for organizing and reviewing new words.

The Student Book includes a self-study audio CD/CD-ROM,

containing the listening passages from the Conversation Strategy sections. It also functions as a computer CD-ROM, allowing students to read conversations as they listen (hiding part or all of them), check exercise answers, record their voices, and compare their pronunciation to the original. The CD-ROM can also be used to create customized printable vocabulary lists, notes, or example sentences.

The massive Teacher's Manual for Touchstone contains the student book pages interleaved with meticulous teaching notes for every activity. The amount of detail, especially on presentation of grammar points, is more than experienced teachers need but will be helpful for novices. There are four homework ideas for each unit as well as photocopiable language summaries (vocabulary and grammatical forms) listed by topic, function, or conversation strategy. The testing program includes both written and oral quizzes for each unit in addition to two written tests covering Units 1-6 and 7-12. A well-designed companion website, Touchstone Arcade, offers five online activities for every unit. Finally, split editions and workbooks are available.

I use Touchstone 4 with intermediate-level (TOEFL 450-500) Japanese university students. The grammar in early units is certainly familiar to them; however, later units introduce forms, such as past perfect and past unreal conditional, which nearly all students need to review. Throughout the book, activities progress from guided practice to open-ended, personalized discussions. Each unit presents a wealth of new vocabulary and the conversation strategies are fresh and motivating. Touchstone is indeed one of the few textbook series with the authentic language necessary for students to develop spoken fluency in English.

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References

- McCarthy, M. (2004). Lessons from the analysis of chunks. *The Language Teacher*, 28(7), 9-12.
- Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.