

**THE TOUCHSTONE SERIES BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY, JEANNE MCCARTEN AND
HELEN SANDIFORD**

**Reviewed by
Anne Lazaraton**

With the ongoing emphasis on authenticity in L2 teaching and learning, it is a welcome development from the teacher's perspective when ESL materials writers consider actual facts about English language use to inform the creative process. In this way, textbook content is supported empirically by including information derived from large, searchable databases rather than textbook author intuitions. One such ESL textbook series has as its foundation facts derived from these language corpora: Cambridge University Press's *Touchstone* series, which is based on the American English subsection of the one billion-word Cambridge International Corpus. The *Touchstone* title reflects the idea that the corpus is a "touchstone" that ensures "each lesson teaches ... authentic and useful language" (*Level 1 Student Book*, p. iv).

OVERVIEW

Touchstone is a four-level, integrated-skills series for (young) adult learners whose English proficiency level ranges from beginning to intermediate. The traditional four skills as well as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are covered, with a heavy emphasis on oral skills, significant attention to grammar and vocabulary, and less focus on reading and writing. Each of the four student books contains 12 units (which must be taught in order, according to the authors), focusing on a broad range of content and topics that form the basis for acquiring these language skills. The units are further broken down into four lessons, each of which contains several subsections. The units are grouped in threes, with a 'Touchstone Checkpoint' at the end of every third unit to assess progress. For the teacher, the introductory Scope and Sequence table maps out the intersections of topics, skills, and learning objectives; students are directed to the introductory page of each unit, which lists unit objectives in clear, understandable language.

Topics included in *Touchstone Level 1 Student Book* should be familiar to teachers who have worked with beginning level, pre-academic L2 learners, including Favorite People, Everyday Life, Free Time, Neighborhoods, Shopping, and Fabulous Food.¹ Each unit has the same general format: Lesson A provides a context with a 'Getting Started' reading and/or listening snippet (found on the class audio CD set). A grammar point is then introduced and practiced; students 'Talk About It' with a partner. Lessons B and C include sections on 'Building Vocabulary', 'Building Language', one or more grammar points, and a focused speaking activity that targets a specific suprasegmental pronunciation feature. In Lesson D, 'Conversation Strategies' are emphasized, with attention to one particular strategy in the 'Strategy Plus' section. A final 'Listening and Speaking' practice and the last section, 'Free Talk', are followed by a concluding 'Vocabulary Notebook' page, which presents activities to consolidate and apply the new words presented in the unit.

¹ Potentially more challenging and less banal topics appear at other levels: Wonders of the World, Tech Savvy?, In the News (*Level 2 Student Book*); Health, Celebrations, Communication (*Level 3 Student Book*); and World Cultures, Socializing, Law and Order, Strange Events, Problem Solving, Behavior, and Fame (*Level 4 Student Book*).

KEY FEATURES

According to the authors, the series embraces “proven and familiar communicative methodologies” (*Level 1 Teacher’s Edition*, p. vi) that are interaction-based. A number of *Touchstone* key features are listed on the back cover of each *Student Book*, four of which² are now explored with reference to Unit 3 in *Touchstone Level 1*, entitled Favorite People.

(1) Contextualized, authentic grammar practice

It is intriguing that this feature tops the list, given that *Touchstone* is not a grammar series. The targeted grammar points in each unit are introduced in a topical context in Lesson A, generally a short reading or conversation on the unit topic. This introductory material is followed by a short inductive activity (3-5 items), entitled ‘Figure it Out’, where students engage in controlled practice: for example, completing sentences by adding the correct possessive adjectives or writing yes-no questions and then giving true answers. This practice is followed by the first ‘Grammar’ section, which illustrates the target form in a shaded box containing example sentences in which the particular structure is bolded. Grammar explanations, if they appear at all, are quite brief, such as “Use the passive when the ‘doer’ of the action is not known or not important” (*Level 4 Student Book*, p. 23). A relevant ‘In Conversation...’ tip informs learners about a corpus finding related to the structure being studied; for example, in Unit 10 learners are told, “In conversation ... people use the simple present and simple past more often than any other tense” (*Level 1 Student Book*, p. 99). A second grammar point is then introduced in Lesson B using the same format; a third or even fourth point may also be presented.

In this way, about 30 grammar structures are introduced and recycled in the *Level 1 Student Book* (as well within and across *Student Books Levels 2-4*); the listening clips and assigned speaking activities in each unit target one or more of these forms. In this sense, the structures permeate the texts and activities in that unit, providing more input for ‘noticing’ to take place. However, many ESL/EFL learners will need or request more explicit grammatical information and more extensive grammar practice, so the teacher should be prepared to supplement the basic, inductive presentations in the *Student Book*.

(2) A focus on learning strategies for vocabulary and conversational management

This goal is met in a number of ways, a definite strength of the series. Every unit contains objectives for and practice with conversation strategies. In Unit 3 of *Level 1 Student Book*, learners are told how to show interest in what their interlocutor says, with a specific focus on *Really?* (which, the authors note, is “one of the top 50 words” in the corpus). Learners first read and listen to a dialog and are directed to notice how the speakers indicate interest. There is both controlled and more communicative practice using the strategy – fill in the blanks, guided talk with a partner, and then practice sample conversations, after which they are instructed to ask each other the questions again, giving true answers about themselves.

In terms of vocabulary learning strategies, each unit ends with a Vocabulary Notebook page, which includes Learning Tips, a Word Builder activity, and an On Your Own activity that suggests independent work on the unit topic. Unit 3 recommends making diagrams with new vocabulary, specifically, a family tree like the one used in the unit to teach relational vocabulary. Students are further advised to make a photo album of their family and friends and to write English sentences about them.

² Other listed features include inductive learning tasks, communicative pronunciation activities, listening strategies, reading that leads to realistic writing tasks, clear learning aims, self-assessment tools, self-study audio CD/CD-ROM.

(3) Empirical facts about spoken language

The most distinctive feature of the *Touchstone* series is the appearance of numerous corpus-based findings on the particular grammar forms, vocabulary words, and discourse structures covered in the text. These facts are presented in the 'In Conversation...' panels: for example, students are told "*I guess* is one of the top 20 expressions" (*Level 2 Student Book*, p. 71); "People say *movie* 15 times more frequently than *film*" (*Level 3 Student Book*, p. 106); "People often say *There's* before plural nouns, but it is not correct to write this" (*Level 1 Student Book*, p. 55). This information is not only useful for learners in acquiring English, but also for teachers (and teacher trainers) who are deciding what facts to include in courses that deal with the structure of English. It would perhaps have been helpful for the book to include a summary list of these findings to make them more accessible for this purpose.

(4) Personalized and communicative learning experiences

As the authors point out, the inclusion of current topics and events, such as popular music and celebrities, is meant to foster motivation in the group of learners the series targets. Many of the practice activities are personalized, indicated by an 'About You' arrow in the text, so that students talk about themselves and their classmates rather than people they may not know or care about. Almost all the practice tasks are communicative in the sense that partners or group members are involved in language production. There are a few activities that require solo work, such as sorting vocabulary words, but even these contain a communicative component by having learners use the words in subsequent discussions with their partners or group members.

Although not mentioned as a key feature, it is apparent that the series stresses the *consistent review and recycling of material* within and across units (and levels). Each student book contains two-page 'Touchstone Checkpoint' review sections that follow every third unit in the book. The Checkpoints provide additional practice with the forms, vocabulary, and conversation strategies introduced in the units; a self-check box requires students to indicate their comfort with these using a 20%, 40%, etc. rating scale. This is followed by a potential Study Plan, where students identify the particular lesson sections they want to review. Thus, students have the opportunity to engage in self-assessment at regular intervals.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

As should be obvious, a great deal of material is covered in each *Student Book*. The eleven pages of Unit 3 in *Level 1 Student Book* contain nearly 30 separate activities that introduce, practice, and review lesson material. This breadth somewhat limits the quality (or depth) of the practice activities; each contains no more than about five or six items per task. An optional *Student Workbook* is available to fill this gap; a workbook answer key appears in the *Teacher's Edition*. Additional avenues for self-study include an audio CD/CD-ROM as well as 'Touchstone Arcade', a student support website with self-scoring activities that provide extra practice with the language forms from the student book.

The extremely comprehensive *Touchstone Teacher's Edition* could be used to plan and deliver an entire course by following the very detailed instructions for each unit, lesson, and section in the *Student Book*. The 'interleaved pages' include lesson plans, additional homework ideas, and as well other information on unit content in the form of language summaries (for example, the nouns and verbs covered in the unit), speech functions (such as greetings), and basic vocabulary. The *Touchstone Testing Program*, included with the

Teacher's Edition, contains oral and written quizzes and tests, an administration and scoring guide, and the CD to accompany the assessments.

An additional component worth considering is the *Level Video*, which “exploits and reinforces the language” taught in each student book, while at the same time providing “natural conversations” that “expand students’ cultural awareness” with “engaging and motivating entertainment” (*Video Resource Book*, back cover). The ‘edudrama’ revolves around six characters who live and work with each other; one is an exchange student from Italy, which affords the others many opportunities to present new vocabulary and explain American cultural norms. The college-age actors are quite adept at making their speech and nonverbal behavior appear ‘real.’ Although more experienced teachers may be able to create memorable and useful content to accompany the video, an information-packed *Video Resource Book* provides comprehensive Teaching Notes, photocopiable Worksheets, as well as Language and Culture Notes for less experienced (or more harried) ESL teachers to rely on.

I was initially skeptical about another supplemental product, *Whiteboard Software*. Although the cost may be prohibitive, the exciting learning environment it creates allows teachers to present complete lessons from a whiteboard screen, including book pages, audio and video components, and listening scripts. The software enables the user to highlight and annotate text, much like a word processing program. It is easy to install and use; it presents a non-cluttered screen with identifiable icons to scroll forward and back, annotate, write, check volume, etc. In other words, all the level components are incorporated in one piece of software. It’s like a combined Powerpoint screen-word processor and once loaded resides on a local computer.

Finally, the *Touchstone* series has morphed into *Touchstone Blended Learning* in recent months. This “fully blended English course” allows teachers to customize instruction for online, face-to-face, or mixed course delivery. The online version uses the same syllabus and methodology as the print materials do, with the addition of numerous interactive and multimedia exercises that are available 24/7. The Cambridge Learning Management System, which provides the platform for the online course, is similar to course management systems like WebVista and Moodle, but with the added benefit of complete integration of Touchstone course content.

Since first impressions matter, a brief remark on the physical appearance of text. Each level of *Touchstone* is characterized with a bright color (reddish pink for Level 1) and a futuristic visual on the front cover. The attractively colored (if somewhat busy) pages contain, in addition to the text itself, inoffensive drawings and actual photographs of objects as well as people. A rainbow of characters includes some with multicultural-sounding names (Elizabeth Park, Mingwei, Yuki, Mary Ann Gomez). The sense one gets is that these people are attractive, upper middle class Americans with leisure time and money (and perfect white teeth). There are a surprising number of pictures of current American celebrities – this is one of the supposed selling points of the series – which, in our media-driven culture, is inherently interesting and motivating content for its particular audience.

SUMMARY

Despite my overall positive reaction to *Touchstone*, a few shortcomings merit a brief comment. For one, the text should not be chosen for its attention to reading and writing. The reading texts are short and adapted; their primary purpose seems to be serving as a template for the pro forma writing activities that end each unit. Secondly, the book presents and practices general rather than (pre-) academic English – this may limit its appeal for

courses or programs where even at lower levels a more academic focus is desired. Finally, my personal opinion is that *Touchstone* plays it too safe – there are no potentially controversial topics or activities; critical thinking (or thinking critically) is not stressed or required. Perhaps in trying to appeal to the broadest possible audience, a decision was made to homogenize the content so that it is almost context-free (besides being North America-centric).

In any case, the *Touchstone* series is far ahead of comparable, integrated-skills ESL/EFL materials that have been published more recently. Learners receive extensive conversational input rich with authentic vocabulary and discourse strategies, take up many opportunities to use these forms in real communication, and encounter a great deal of grammatical language just waiting to be noticed.

REVIEWER

Anne Lazaraton is an Associate Professor in and Director of the Second Language Studies Program at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches courses in ESL Methods, Language Analysis, and Discourse Analysis.

PRODUCT INFORMATION

Product website:

http://www.cambridge.org/us/esl/catalog/subject/project/item404931/Touchstone-Product-home/?site_locale=en_US¤tSubjectID=2489422

Gitzy, A. (2008). *Touchstone level 1 DVD*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$158.00.

Gokay, J. (2008). *Touchstone level 1 video resource book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$26.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2005). *Touchstone level 1 student book with audio CD/CD-ROM*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$26.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2005). *Touchstone level 2 student book with audio CD/CD-ROM*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$26.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2005). *Touchstone level 1 teacher's edition with audio CD*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$46.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2005). *Touchstone level 1 workbook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$16.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2006). *Touchstone level 3 student book with audio CD/CD-ROM*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$26.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2006). *Touchstone level 4 student book with audio CD/CD-ROM*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$26.00.

McCarthy, M., McCarten, J., & Sandiford, H. (2009). *Touchstone level 1 whiteboard software*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$400.00.