

*The Effectiveness of Using Touchstone 1a to Promote
Low English Proficiency Students at College*

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Introduction

EFL textbooks are perceived as a vital and important element in English language teaching and learning as it not only provides a framework for teachers in reaching the aims and objectives of the course, it also serves as an effective resource for students' self-directed learning. Being at the core of the language learning and teaching process, it is considered imperative for educators to make the appropriate selection and implementation of EFL textbooks within a course that would cater to the needs of a particular learning group. Researchers such as Cunningsworth (1995) and Miekley (2005) have developed textbook evaluation checklists that serve as way for educators to select the materials that closely reflect the aims, methods, and values of an English language program. Although there is significant research related to textbook evaluation, the majority of the research on the essential components of an appropriate and effective EFL textbook focuses on educators' evaluative perspectives while limited research examined students' perspectives as end-users. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore low English proficiency students whose overall average CSEPT score was 100 level students' perception toward the effectiveness of using *Touchstone 1A* in the 24-credit General English courses at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages.

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages (Wenzao) in Kaohsiung, Taiwan has run the 24-credit General English courses for twelve years since 2003. The overall aims of the 24-credit program are to improve students' English proficiency and to broaden their learning horizon. The students come from a variety of vocational high schools. Many of them are preparing for tertiary level study through English, and therefore have to develop their English proficiency to a point where they are able to encounter the most useful and widely language in spoken and written context. Not long ago, many educators at the school felt that students were making minimal progress in their English proficiency. Although there were dedicated English classes five hours per week, it seemed that the English classes themselves were insufficient for students' development of adequate English language ability. Therefore, the school set up a "corpus-informed" English course, and implemented the Touchstone series as its textbook since it was a large database of everyday conversations and written texts to show students how people can actually use English.

To elicit low proficiency students' perception toward the effectiveness of using *Touchstone 1A* in the 24-credit General English courses at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, data was collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items toward students' perception of the use of *Touchstone 1A* in the General English

course context. 102 low English proficiency level freshmen were chosen as the study participants. The findings revealed that most participants held positive perceptions toward the use of *Touchstone 1A* in the General English course. Findings also revealed the areas that students believe should be improved.

Literature Review

In explaining the vital role of textbooks in English language teaching, Hutchinson and Torres (1994, p. 315) claim that the textbook is “an almost universal element of [English language] teaching . . . No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook.” As Skierso (1991, pp. 432-453) observes, very few teachers manage to teach without textbooks. Indeed, most teachers rely heavily on them in seeking to ensure that students attain prescribed teaching goals and objectives. With specific reference to language teaching, Harmer (2000, p. 117) notes that textbooks not only give teachers ideas about what to teach, but also about how to teach, often functioning as a basic syllabus for a class. Thus, textbooks can reduce a teacher’s workload and can also provide a link between school and home (Brewster & Ellis, 2002, p. 152). Furthermore, students often have strong expectations about using a textbook in the language classroom and believe that published materials have more credibility than teacher-generated materials (Sheldon, 1988, p. 237).

Cunningsworth (1995, p. 7) identifies a number of roles that textbooks can serve in the curriculum, including provision of (a) a syllabus based on pre-determined learning objectives, (b) an effective resource for self-directed learning, (c) an effective medium for the presentation of new material, (d) a source of ideas and activities, (e) a reference source for students, and (f) support for less experienced teachers who need to gain confidence. Although some educationalists believe that there is a danger that inexperienced teachers may become over-reliant on textbooks, others argue that textbooks can actually save students from a teacher’s deficiencies (O’Neill, 1982; Williams, 1983; Kitao & Kitao 1997). Furthermore, it has been argued that textbooks can provide an important source of innovation and can support teachers through potentially disturbing and threatening change processes by introducing change gradually, creating scaffolding upon which teachers can build, and demonstrating new and/ or untried methodologies (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994, p. 323).

While there are many educationalists who point out the benefits of using textbooks in teaching additional languages, there are others who take a more negative view of textbooks. Sheldon (1988, p. 239) sees them as the “tainted end-product of an author’s

or a publisher's desire for quick profit", with many of them making false claims and being marked by serious theoretical problems, design flaws, and practical shortcomings. Fullan (1991, p. 70) notes that approved textbooks may easily become the curriculum in the classroom whilst failing to incorporate significant features of the policy or goals that they are supposed to address, the result being that a textbook may actually distract attention from behaviours and educational beliefs that are crucial to the achievement of desired outcomes. Allwright (1981, pp. 6-8), argues that textbooks are not only inflexible, but also generally reflect the pedagogic, psychological, and linguistic preferences and biases of their authors, and Levis (1999, p. 37) maintains that textbooks are culturally and socially biased and contain inauthentic language. As far as Litz (2005) is concerned, textbooks do not present an adequate reflection of the different types of pronunciation, language structures, grammar, idioms, grammar, idioms, vocabulary, and conversational rules, routines and strategies that learners will need to use in the real-world. Whether one perceives that textbooks are instrumental in English teaching and learning or that they are too biased and inflexible, it cannot be denied that textbooks are still predominantly popular and still maintain an essential role within the classroom.

Tok (2010) points out that evaluation is a fundamental part of teaching and learning; it provides educators extensive information in terms of classroom practice, course planning and task design. Evaluation is also essential for the use of instructional materials such as textbooks in the classroom. Cunningsworth (1995, p.7) suggests that in choosing and evaluating textbooks, educators should ensure that "careful selection is made, and that the materials selected closely reflect [the needs of the learners and] the aims, methods, and values of the teaching program". A number of textbook evaluation checklists that are intended to be applicable irrespective of context have been developed (see, for example, Byrd, 2001; Chambers, 1997; Cunningsworth, 1984, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Harmer, 1998, 2001; Miekley, 2005; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991; Tomlinson, 2008, 2010; Tsai, 1999; Ur, 1996; Williams, 1983). These generally include factors such as physical characteristics, methodology, consistency with the overall curriculum, and extent to which teacher needs are met, as well as linguistic and cultural content, skills, topics, and gender representation. For example, Cunningsworth (1995) divides evaluation criteria into eight categories - *aims and approaches, design and organization, language content, skills, topics, methodology, teacher's books, and practical considerations*. While evaluative checklists are many and varied, the central aim is to make the teaching and learning environment more effective by identifying the particular strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks. For example, by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the textbooks adapted in class, Mc

Grath (2006) points out that teachers are able to analyze their own presuppositions about the nature of teaching and learning English. Although extensive research has been conducted in regards to textbook evaluation, the focal point has been on educators' perspectives, limited research have provided insight into whether or not students view their textbooks as conducive to their English language learning. To address this gap in the literature, this study was conducted as a means to explore 102 low proficiency level students' perceptions and evaluations of *Touchstone IA*, the textbook adapted for use in their 24-credit General English course at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages.

Objectives and significance of the study

This study aims at investigation low proficiency students' perceptions toward the effectiveness of using *Touchstone IA* for general content, self-access proficiency improvement, supplementary materials and learning difficulties. .

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are low English proficiency students' perceptions of general contents of *Touchstone IA*?
2. What are low English proficiency students' perceptions of their English proficiency improvement (listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar) through *Touchstone IA*?
3. What are low English proficiency students' perceptions of supplementary materials of *Touchstone IA*?
4. What learning difficulties do low English proficiency students encounter when they use *Touchstone IA*?

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable information to supplement the literature about EFL textbook use in the college level in Taiwan. This study may also provide a potential point of reference in quantitative literature and establish grounds for further research in the vocational college EFL context.

Research Method

The participants in this study were 102 freshmen (M=44; F=68) who were attending four of the classes in the 24-credit English program at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages in the second semester of the academic year 2009/2010. Their overall average CSEPT score was 100. The anonymity of the respondents was established by specifically asking them not to write their names on the questionnaires copies.

Questionnaires were used as the initial survey instrument for students and the final questionnaires consisted 30 items. The questionnaires were written in Chinese (see Appendix). Questions 1 to 29 used a five-point Likert scale, (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) somewhat agree, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree. In addition, the survey had one open-ended question (30) to elicit additional opinions from the students.

The reliability of the questionnaire was established using test-retest on twenty-eight EFL students who were excluded from the sample. Chronbach alpha was calculated and found to equal 90.4%.

The questionnaire data were gathered in the last 20 minutes of the students' class time, via prior agreement with the teachers. Of the 140 copies distributed, 102 copies were returned to the researchers, yielding a response rate of 73%.

Finding and discussion

In this section, the findings are presented and discussed according to the four research questions posed in the study. The first question are discussed together after the presentation of tables 1 and 2, while the second, third and fourth questions are discussed independently after that.

To answer the first question, which investigates low English proficiency students' perceptions of general contents of *Touchstone 1A*, 13 questionnaire items were used. The participants' responses are presented in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1: The Percentages of Students' Responses Concerning the Objectives of *Touchstone 1A*

Items	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	<i>Touchstone 1A</i> clearly presents its learning objectives.	11	64	25	0	0
2	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> matches its learning objectives.	12	57	29	2	0
3	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> meets my learning needs.	11	41	33	14	1

Table 2: The Percentages of Students' Responses Concerning the Contents of *Touchstone 1A*

Items	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4	The difficulty level of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> 's content fits my proficiency level.	16	38	28	16	2
5	There is sufficient content in <i>Touchstone 1A</i> .	9	41	34	14	2
6	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> increases my English learning motivation.	12	37	29	20	2
7	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> increases my confidence in learning English.	18	45	29	6	2
8	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> improves my English learning strategies.	13	47	28	11	1
9	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> helps develop my integrated English skills.	17	32	46	5	0
10	The unit topics in <i>Touchstone 1A</i> are interesting.	13	44	33	10	0

11	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> helps me have a better understanding of multi-cultures.	19	43	29	9	0
12	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> increases my daily English communication skills.	24	46	24	5	1
13	The content of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> expands my theme-based vocabulary.	12	31	33	22	2

The findings suggest that about 75% of the respondents (strongly) agree *Touchstone 1A* clearly presents its learning objectives, while 69% and 52% of the respondents (strongly) agree the content of *Touchstone 1A* matches its learning objectives and their needs. In addition, 54% and 57% of the respondents (strongly) agree the difficulty level of *Touchstone 1A*'s content fits their proficiency level and the unit topic in *Touchstone 1A* are interesting. Half of the respondents (50%) (strongly) agree there is sufficient content in *Touchstone 1A*, respectively.

The findings also show that 49%, 63%, 60%, 70% and 43% (strongly) agree the content of *Touchstone 1A* increases and improve their, English learning motivation, confidence in learning, English strategies, daily English communication skills and theme-based vocabulary, respectively. 49% and 62% respondents (strongly) agree the content of *Touchstone 1A* helps develop integrated English skills and have a better understanding of multi-cultures.

To answer the second research question, which investigates participants' self-access proficiency improvement through *Touchstone 1A*, five questionnaire items were used. Table 3 presents the percentages of the participants' responses.

Table 3: The Percentages of Students' Responses Concerning the *Self-access Proficiency Improvement* through *Touchstone 1A*

Items	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewh at Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14	<i>Touchstone 1A</i> improves my English listening proficiency.	18	50	24	6	2
15	<i>Touchstone 1A</i> improves my English speaking proficiency.	15	51	27	5	2

16	<i>Touchstone 1A</i> improves my English reading proficiency.	9	33	41	16	1
17	<i>Touchstone 1A</i> improves my English writing proficiency.	4	34	46	15	1
18	<i>Touchstone 1A</i> improves my English grammar usage.	7	36	44	11	2

Table 3 shows that 68%, 66%, 42%, 38%, and 43% of the respondents reported (strongly) agree *Touchstone 1A* improves their, English listening proficiency, speaking proficiency, reading proficiency, writing proficiency and grammar usage. In general, the findings indicate that reading proficiency, writing proficiency and grammar usage improvement are comparatively weak.

Table 4 presents the percentages of the participants' responses to the third question which investigates participants' responses concerning the supplementary materials of *Touchstone 1A*. Nine questionnaire items were used.

Table 4: The Percentages of Students' Responses Concerning the *Supplementary Materials of Touchstone 1A* (response frequencies in percentages)

Items	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19	The videos in <i>Touchstone 1A</i> increase my interest in learning English.	15	41	32	11	1
20	The videos in <i>Touchstone 1A</i> familiarize me with its content.	17	45	31	7	0
21	The videos in <i>Touchstone 1A</i> help me incorporate the content in daily life.	19	47	27	6	1
22	The self-recording function of <i>Touchstone 1A</i> helps me have a better understanding of English pronunciation and intonation.	15	49	26	9	1
23	The supplementary CDs in <i>Touchstone 1A</i> increase my chance to practice its content.	12	37	37	12	2

24	The supplementary CDs in Touchstone 1A help me practice my English listening and speaking after class.	12	38	37	12	1
25	The supplementary CDs in Touchstone 1A help me practice my English vocabulary after class.	8	30	44	16	2
26	The workbook in Touchstone 1A familiarizes me with its content.	16	54	27	2	1
27	The workbook in Touchstone 1A helps prepare me for English proficiency tests. (Example: CESPT)	3	29	36	29	3

As shown in Table 4, 56%, 62% and 66% of the respondents (strongly) agree the videos in *Touchstone 1A* increase their interest in learning English, familiarize them with its content and help them incorporate the content in daily life. 64% of the respondents (strongly) agree the self-recording function of *Touchstone 1A* helps them have a better understanding of English pronunciation and intonation. The findings also show that 49%, 50% the supplementary CDs in Touchstone 1A increase their chance to practice its content, English listening, speaking English and vocabulary after class. Moreover, a majority of respondents (70%) (strongly) agree the workbook in *Touchstone 1A* familiarizes them with its content. However, quite a few students (32%) (strongly) disagree that this textbook can help them to prepare for English proficiency tests. (i.e. *Item 27*). As a matter of fact, at the research context, teachers use *Touchstone 1A* mainly to develop students' productive skills and receptive skills. There is another material, namely, *My ET*, used for students to reading and listening texts through exercising certain testing strategies and skills.

Item 28 asked participants whether they encounter any learning difficulties when they use *Touchstone 1A*. Twenty-one (21) participants did not respond to this question. The remaining 383 responses were classified into 10 groups as follows (see Table 5):

Table 5: *Perceived learning difficulties*

Items	Entry	Number of responses
	Learning English strategies	12

28	Vocabulary	29
	Listening	39
	Speaking	34
	Reading	14
	Writing	49
	Integrated English skills	23
	Pronunciation	34
	Learning motivation	32
	Grammar	34

The questionnaire respondents can tick more than one box if they encounter various learning difficulties when using *Touchstone 1A*. Based on the results, some of the participants perceive that they have more difficulties in writing in English, understanding grammar, and speaking English. When it comes to productive skills, there are 34 and 49 responses to the difficulties of improving oral performance and English writing through using *Touchstone 1A*. As for the difficulty of learning grammar stated earlier, 40 participants suggest the publishing house increase grammar practice in *Touchstone 1A*.

Item 29 asked participants to select the recommended comments which they think can be added to *Touchstone 1A*. Twenty-two (22) participants chose not to comment. The number of responses to this question was 256. The comments made are classified into categories in Table 6.

Table 6: Recommended contents

Items	Entry	Number of responses
29	Learning strategies	29
	Vocabulary practice	39
	Amount of vocabulary	56
	Listening practice	49
	Speaking practice	36
	Reading practice	48
	Writing practice	53
	Integrated English practice	21
	Pronunciation practice	27
	Grammar practice	40

Based on the generated responses, the amount of vocabulary, listening practice, reading practice, and grammar practice are wished to be added to *Touchstone 1A*, respectively recommended by 56, 49, 48, 40 out of the 102 participants. This result may correspond to the participants' answer to *Item 5* regarding the insufficiency of the textbook contents. Learning strategies and writing practices are also recommended by 29 and 53 out of the 102 participants. Apparently, the low achievement students can reflect on what they want and need during their learning process while using *Touchstone 1A* at school.

Finally, participants were asked (*Item 30*) to add any other general comments they wished to make. Just over half chose not to comment. The comments made are classified into categories in Table 7.

Table 7: Comments made by respondents

Items	Statements	Number of responses
Comments	I hope there is Chinese translation to help me to understand the content.	1
	We need more and short reading texts in each lesson.	5
	There is not adequate vocabulary.	8
	We need more listening practices.	7
	Grammar practices are insufficient.	7
	There are some basic grammar structures in the book so that I learn grammar easily.	6
	This is an interesting book, which motivates me to learn English.	4
	It is more useful to learn English integrated way.	1
	This is a good and well-organized material.	2
	I can learn practical every-day language.	7

According to the results, some students hope to learn more new vocabulary words ($N=8$), more reading texts ($N=5$), and more listening practices ($N=7$) in *Touchstone 1A*. Other than that, there are nine open-ended comments on the amount of vocabulary ($N=2$) and the textbook ($N=7$). Seven students comment on their need of learning more grammar structures. These findings might help us expand the understanding of English grammar in use from the perspective of these low achievement students. In respect of the textbook content, 20 comments tend to be quite positive, such as ‘There are some basic grammar structures in the book so that I learn grammar easily,’ ‘This is an interesting book, which motivated me to learn English,’ ‘I can learn practical every-day language,’ and ‘this is a well-organized book.’ One participant thinks the Chinese translation is needed in the *Touchstone 1A* to enhance comprehension ability.

Conclusion

To conclude, more than half of the participants had positive perspectives about using *Touchstone 1A* to promote their proficiency level of English in the language classroom. In this project, the questionnaire findings and results have unveiled what the low achievement students actually think about using *Touchstone 1A*. They are relatively aware of their wants and needs. Without finishing this project, teachers might never make this two-way communication flow smooth between students and them. It is worth noting that students' perceptions of learning materials enhances self-esteem and motivation and encourages further learning. In order to enhance the effectiveness of using *Touchstone 1A* to promote students' English proficiency, here are some suggestions made based on the survey results for the publisher, English teachers, and the policy makers.

The amount of new vocabulary words in each lesson, grammatical structures, listening practices and vocabulary practices are expected most as far as these students are concerned. In addition to supposedly frequent dialogues practice, students perceive that they need to expand their current vocabulary bank through short reading texts by using *Touchstone 1A*. As well as this, they need to improve their understanding of English grammar in use through having more four skills based lessons and practices. Teachers mainly aim to help students be more capable of speaking and writing in English freely while they can comprehend input by listening and/or reading a passage/conversation. Both can help them turn new words into their active vocabulary use, and be more likely to express themselves clearly and variously in four skills.

These research results have pointed out the necessity and direction of choosing extra supplementary materials to match students' expectations of four skills learning strategies in the classroom. Teachers can find something which fits into the program, corresponds to the teaching and learning objectives, and the aims of lessons, such as extended vocabulary, varied text-types reading related to topics, and extra grammar worksheets. As low English proficiency students might be unable to find themselves useful and helpful approaches to learning English outside the classroom, teachers may give them a hand and make these extra supplementary materials available at this learning stage.

Students at this low English proficiency level of English need more opportunities to strengthen their willingness to communicate in English and to attend to their writing

difficulties than high-level students. The publisher may add more of the writing activities encourage process writing practice and promote realistic discourse by using *Touchstone 1A*. Hence, every individual student is more likely to write English frequently with their peers and groups, and the teacher would be more available to assist students in solving their writing problems or improve students' learning strategies. These suggestions are hopefully to enhance the quality and quantity of learning English for low English proficiency students at College.

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251-261.

Appendix

※ Touchstone 1A=T

Items	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. T clearly presents its learning objectives.					
2. The content of T matches its learning objectives.					
3. The content of T meets my learning needs.					
4. The difficulty level of T's content fits my proficiency level.					
5. There is sufficient content in T.					
6. The content of T increases my English learning motivation.					
7. The content of T increases my confidence in learning English.					
8. The content of T improves my English learning strategies.					
9. The content of T helps develop my integrated English skills.					
10. The unit topics in T are interesting.					
11. The content of T helps me have a better understanding of multi-cultures.					
12. The content of T increases my daily English communication skills.					
13. The content of T expands my theme-based vocabulary.					
14. T improves my English listening proficiency.					
15. T improves my English speaking proficiency.					
16. T improves my English reading proficiency.					
17. T improves my English writing proficiency.					

18. T improves my English grammar usage.					
19. The videos in T increase my interest in learning English.					
20. The videos in T familiarize me with its content.					
21. The videos in T help me incorporate the content in daily life.					
22. The self-recording function of T helps me have a better understanding of English pronunciation and intonation					
23. The supplementary CDs in T increase my chance to practice its content.					
24. The supplementary CDs in T help me practice my English listening and speaking after class.					
25. The supplementary CDs in T help me practice my English vocabulary after class.					
26. The workbook in T familiarizes me with its content.					
27. The workbook in T helps prepare me for English proficiency tests. (Example: CESPT)					
28. <i>The Difficulties while using the T materials.</i> (Multiple selections are accepted)					
Learning English strategies	Vocabulary	Listening			
Speaking	Reading	Writing			
Integrated English skills	Pronunciation	Learning motivation			
Grammar	others: _____				
Please provide some examples you have encountered: _____					
29. <i>The suggestions that could be included to the T materials</i> (Multiple selections are accepted)					
Learning strategies	Vocabulary practice	Amount of vocabulary			
Listening practice	Speaking practice	Reading practice			
Writing practice	Integrated English practice	Pronunciation practice			
Grammar practice	others: _____				
Please give some suggestions you hope to add in the T materials : _____					
30. Any other comments on using the T materials? _____					