An Evaluation of *Four Corners* in Asia University’s Freshman English Program

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Abstract

In the fall semester of 2012, several instructors at the Center for English Language Education of Asia University piloted various textbooks in search of a replacement for the textbook series in use at that time. From among the materials piloted, the Cambridge University Press series *Four Corners* was adopted for use in the majority of Freshman English classes at Asia University. This article presents a brief overview of this textbook and its accompanying materials. Based on the results of a questionnaire, it also discusses CELE instructors’ experiences using this new series during its first semester of use, including how well instructors feel these materials have addressed the stated goals and objectives of Freshman English at Asia University. Finally, a brief discussion of the responses is presented.

Introduction

As is the case in many four-year universities in Japan, all students are required to take an English course during their first year of study. Such courses often require a textbook, which may focus on speaking and listening, or on the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. At Asia University, a four-skills textbook and accompanying supplemental materials have been used in most Freshman English classes for a number of years. Some teachers had been dissatisfied with the previous textbook series, however. As a result, the Curriculum Development Committee of Asia University’s Center for English Language Education (henceforth referred to as CELE), in consultation with the Vice Director, developed a formalized procedure for piloting new textbooks.

CELE faculty members are divided into four textbook groups, with the highest level group consisting of three teachers, and the remaining groups comprised of five to six instructors each. (An advanced Freshman English class also exists, but students in this section are not assigned a textbook.) This arrangement allows instructors with students of similar Freshman English levels to collaborate on their efforts with respect to the
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textbook series used within their group. As part of the piloting process, groups ranked the textbook and accompanying materials according to how well they appeared to meet Freshman English Goals and Objectives. Groups also analyzed and ranked the series on a number of other items, some of which originated from textbook evaluation criteria found in H.D. Brown’s *Teaching by Principles* (p. 192, adapted from Robinett).

After completing the piloting process, which included trialing one or two units in class, followed by discussion within each textbook group about the various textbooks under consideration, all four textbook groups selected the *Four Corners* series as the primary textbook for Freshman English. Returning teachers who wished to use an alternative textbook were permitted to do so, however. Beginning in the spring semester of 2013, a total of 13 of 21 Freshman English instructors used *Four Corners*. This article explores CELE instructors’ experiences with this new series following its first semester of use.

**Structure and Content of *Four Corners***

*Four Corners*, written by Jack C. Richards and David Bohlke, and published by Cambridge University Press in 2012, is a four-skills English textbook. The content of the textbook and accompanying materials was influenced by the CEFR, or Common European Framework of Reference for languages. The CEFR provides guidelines for measuring student progress in the learning of a language. The “Can-do” statements found throughout the book are based on the CEFR, and are intended to help students measure their achievements as they progress through the various units of the text.

The *Four Corners* series presents a notional-functional syllabus, covering a wide range of subjects and situations, such as dining out, exploring a city, and shopping. The student book includes a self-study CD-ROM with which students can get extra English practice outside of class. For example, students can check their understanding of the content of each unit through vocabulary and grammar exercises, listening activities, and self-tests. A teacher-only DVD provides a video for each unit; accompanying video materials are available to copy for students from the Teacher’s Manual, which also provides useful guidelines and ideas for the teaching of each lesson. The three-CD set provides listening material for each of the twelve units of the textbook. A workbook is also available for students to
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purchase separately, should the teacher require it. For an additional cost, a version of the workbook which includes an online component may be purchased. Finally, the Classware CD-ROM is available to teachers, and in addition to containing all video and audio from the DVD and CD, it allows teachers to present the textbook material in more dynamic and interactive ways. For example, instructors can cover selected parts of a printed dialogue on the screen and ask students to guess the missing words or write down the missing words as they listen.

Each unit of the textbook is structured in the same way. All units begin with a “Warm-up” page to introduce and build schema for the subject matter of each unit. For example, Unit 8 of Four Corners 2, “Fun in the city,” presents a number of photos depicting scenes from big cities and asks students to describe what is happening in each. Following the warm-up, Lesson A presents some of the grammar and vocabulary to be used in the unit, while also providing interactive exercises which allow students to see and listen to the new grammar and vocabulary being used in context.

Lesson B focuses on the functional language of the unit, with an emphasis on listening and speaking. For example, in Unit 8 in Four Corners 2, Lesson B presents a conversation between two people about a trip one of the speakers will take to Brazil. One speaker asks for suggestions and recommendations while the other offers them. The final activity of this lesson gives students a chance to practice using the language from the conversation by giving and receiving recommendations about a city. Lesson C presents additional grammar and vocabulary, again followed by opportunities for listening and speaking. Lesson D focuses on reading and writing skills, often presenting naturalistic texts, such as, blogs, short biographies, or even social media status updates. The speaking section at the end of Lesson D personalizes the content by giving students opportunities for discussion; for example, in Unit 8, students discuss their own cities, shopping habits, and places they would like to travel. The end of each of these four lessons presents a “Can-do” statement box which students can check after they have completed the lesson. Finally, a unit “Wrap-up” page offers some quick activities to review and practice with the main themes of each lesson.

Instructor Feedback
In order to gather feedback on instructors’ experiences with *Four Corners*, I created a sixteen-question questionnaire (see Appendix) and distributed it to all teachers using *Four Corners* in at least one of their Freshman English classes. Of the twelve questionnaires distributed, ten were completed and returned. The data gathered provided useful information about instructors’ use of the textbook and related materials, as well as students’ reactions to the new series as noted by questionnaire respondents. As mentioned above, participants also provided feedback about how well this new textbook series addressed the stated goals and objectives of Freshman English. The following is a summary of the questionnaire results.

All instructors reported that they were using the main textbook regularly and that they used the book for at least 50% of their class time. Eight were using either the standard or online workbook corresponding to their book level. Seven were using the accompanying DVD, and seven were using the audio CD, while four were making use of the Classware. Half of respondents covered three or four units of the textbook in the first semester, while the other half covered five or six. Most instructors reported using a majority of the four lessons in each unit, with Lesson D, which highlights reading skills, being the most commonly omitted. Some instructors noted that they omitted lesson activities that they felt were not useful.

All instructors reported that they supplement the textbook in some way. Supplemental activities mentioned by teachers included extensive reading, timed writing, and activities focusing on critical thinking skills. One teacher created a supplemental handout that was “heavy on communicative activities and writing.” Nearly all instructors reported creating some of their own materials to supplement the book, and two mentioned using other textbooks to do so.

From Question 8, which asked about the strengths and weaknesses of *Four Corners*, various themes arose. Regarding strengths, one teacher noted the “diversity of content” offered, while another mentioned the “broad range of activities and topics.” Another teacher commented that “the themes and structure of the units are logical” and also that they “lend themselves to communicative activities.” One instructor commented that the book is “very organized” and “goes from easy to difficult well,” while another liked the “balance of the different skills” offered. Another teacher commented that the
“DVD is good since the students get a chance to write about themselves as well as answering questions about what they see in the DVD.”

A number of negative points of the materials were also noted by respondents, however. For example, one instructor pointed out that the book does not help students “see the connection between learning grammar and using English and understanding the meaning of what they are saying.” Another teacher commented that some of the “Interactions” sections of Lesson B are not related to the subject matter of the unit, while another expressed that the reading sections in Lesson D are “not approachable and not very useful.” Three instructors expressed disappointment with the accompanying videos. One stated that the DVD program was “overly rehearsed and unnatural.”

In Question 9, teachers shared their perceptions of students’ feelings and thoughts about the book. A number of instructors commented that their students seem to like or enjoy the book. However, two instructors felt that their students were either indifferent or “[did not] care too much about it.”

Question 10 asked teachers whether they feel the book and related materials personalize the content sufficiently and make it relevant to students’ lives. This question yielded mixed results. Some instructors expressed that *Four Corners* does personalize its content well, and one mentioned that conversations are “easily adapted to relate to students’ lives and experiences.” Others answered that the textbook does not personalize content. One instructor commented that it is “up to the teacher to personalize the content” but that *Four Corners* “[does] as good a job as a text can do.” Others said that they personalize the content with their own materials. One teacher commented, “Topics [are] so basic it’s easy to personalize them.”

In Question 11, instructors shared what they would change, if anything, about their use of *Four Corners* next semester. While no broad themes arose from this question, two instructors said that they will supplement more than they currently do, with one planning to use authentic materials. Another will focus more on speaking and less on grammar. Two instructors explained that their textbook use will depend on the needs of the class.

Questions 12 through 16 asked respondents to provide feedback on how well they feel that *Four Corners* serves the stated goals and objectives of Freshman English. Question 12 inquired about the primary goal of
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Freshman English, which is for students to develop their English conversation ability. Seven instructors answered that *Four Corners* “Mostly” addresses this goal. One answered “Completely,” and two teachers responded with “Partly.”

Question 13 inquired about Goal #1: “Students will develop skills to adapt to FE classroom culture.” The result here was much less positive that in Question 12, with only three teachers answering “Mostly” or “Completely,” six responding “Partly,” and one “Not at all.”

Question 14 queried teachers about Goal #2: “Students will improve their English communication skills.” This question yielded more positive answers, with seven instructors answering “Mostly” or “Completely” with respect to speaking skills and eight answering “Mostly” or “Completely” regarding listening skills. Reading and writing skills ratings fared less well, however, with seven instructors answering “Partly” or “Not at all” for reading skills and eight answering “Partly” or “Not at all” for writing skills.

Question 15 asked teachers about Goal #3: “Students will improve their abilities to interact with people from other cultures.” Eight of ten instructors answered “Not at all” or “Partly” to this question, while only one each checked “Mostly” or “Completely.”

Finally, Question 16 asked instructors about Goal #4: “Students will develop skills to express critical thinking in English.” These results were the least positive of all, with three instructors noting “Not at all,” six checking “Partly,” and only one marking “Mostly.”

**Discussion**

Based on the results of the questionnaire, teachers seem to be generally satisfied with *Four Corners* and feel that it is a useful tool in helping their students meet some Freshman English Goals and Objectives. Some positive themes that emerged were that *Four Corners* offers an interesting array of topics and is sequenced well, and that its grammar is not overemphasized. On the negative side, the series does not always highlight the importance of speaking, accompanying videos are not always interesting or naturalistic, and clear connections are not always made between the grammar sections and the speaking activities. With respect to this last point, Nunan (1989), referring to Rivers and Temperly (1978), discussed how language-learning activities may be classified as “skill getting” or “skill
using.” The former are analogous to what are traditionally referred to as controlled activities, as contrasted with the latter, which are freer, less controlled activities in which students are using the target form for meaningful communication. Perhaps *Four Corners* does not always provide a clear path from skill getting to skill using.

It is a positive sign that seven of ten instructors felt that the primary goal of FE – for students to develop their English conversation ability – was “mostly” well addressed by the *Four Corners* series. Goal #2, “Students will improve their English communication skills,” also met with positive responses, but only with respect to Speaking and Listening. This data suggests that *Four Corners* may be more effective at promoting speaking and listening. Given the primary course goal of developing students’ conversational abilities, it is appropriate that the textbook emphasizes conversation skills.

On the other hand, three of the stated FE Goals and Objectives appear not to be as well addressed by *Four Corners*: Goal #1, Goal #3, and Goal #4. As for Goal #1, “Students will develop skills to adapt to FE classroom culture,” some instructors explained their answers. One instructor commented that “some students never adapt” and noted that in spite of a teacher’s desire for students to learn through group and pair work, some students still “prefer to learn alone.” This sentiment was echoed by another instructor who commented, “Some students are still reluctant to share with others. Even if it is just likes and dislikes.” Another teacher pointed out, in response to a different question, that this textbook is “made to be used around the world.” Indeed, since this textbook series was most likely designed with a large and varied audience in mind, it probably does not do enough to bridge the gap between our typical learner’s background and the expectations of the book.

Concerning Goal #3, “Students will improve their ability to interact with people from other cultures,” *Four Corners* did not receive overall favorable ratings. As one teacher noted, there is “not too much about foreign cultures (manners, traditions, customs) in the book.” Another noted that there is “nothing in Level 1 so far on extralinguistic factors (posture, eye contact, tone of voice, body language, customs, etc.)” While there are some conversations and monologues presented in non-native voices, and some dialogues on topics such as places to visit in foreign countries, the series
may not present enough intercultural information to adequately address this goal.

The least favorable responses were given in the final question, which inquired about Goal #4, “Students will develop skills to express critical thinking in English.” Three instructors commented that *Four Corners* does not address this goal at all. Another three said it does so only partly. Only one stated that this goal is mostly addressed. Most of the comments on this item tended toward the negative side as well. One teacher commented that “there are a variety of factors that make this unrealistic” and another noted that “The book [as] is does not inspire students to do some critical thinking.” Another instructor wrote that this is “too ambitious a goal with the students we teach.” Some of the more specific subgoals listed for this goal, however, may be achievable. For example, “Students will be able to support opinions with reasons and examples” is not out of reach for the average Freshman English student at Asia University.

Of course, it is neither reasonable nor expected that any one textbook should meet all of the goals and objectives of a course, or even a large majority of them. Garinger (2002) suggests as a benchmark that a potential textbook should address at least half of a course’s objectives. Most English language teachers understand the need to address the particular needs of their students and make efforts to supplement the text with their own materials or other resources. Many CELE teachers noted in their questionnaire comments that they do so. Garinger (2002) discussed the utility of using both a textbook and other materials to maximize the benefits to students: “While every instructor should supplement…[to] reflect the unique needs of the class, a textbook that can be used consistently within that classroom seems more likely to be useful to both the instructor and students” (para. 5).

**Conclusion**

This inquiry into the effectiveness of the *Four Corners* textbook series within Asia University’s Freshman English courses elicited useful feedback from CELE instructors. This information helped to bring out the series’ strengths and provided some insights into how well Freshman English Goals and Objectives are being addressed by *Four Corners*. Insights into the
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series’ weaknesses similarly provided useful information about where it may fall short in serving Asia University’s freshman students.

Overall, the Four Corners series appears to be meeting many of the needs of our Freshman English students, with some notable exceptions. The textbook and its accompanying materials provide many opportunities for speaking and listening on a variety of engaging topics. While a number of teachers reported that they had supplemented the textbook with other materials, this is not surprising and in fact should be expected in order to meet the specific needs of our students. As Dörnyei stated, “In order to make these texts motivating, we need to relate the subjects to the everyday experiences and backgrounds of the students” (2001, p. 64). Doing so often requires creating or locating supplemental materials and/or identifying appropriate classroom activities that make the textbook content relevant to our students’ lives.

Further inquiries should be made into the effectiveness of Four Corners in the future. For example, both Freshman English students and their instructors should provide feedback in the form of questionnaires and evaluations of their experiences with these materials. Instructors should also administer regular assessments to their students that measure the level of achievement of the “Can-do” statements found at the end of each lesson in Four Corners. In addition, the regular sharing of ideas among teachers using this textbook series will help to enhance its effectiveness. Instructors should also discuss the role of the textbook in Freshman English in general, with a view toward understanding to what extent and how well it is addressing the goals and objectives of Freshman English.

References


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Appendix
Four Corners Questionnaire

Survey – Four Corners

1. What level of Four Corners are you using? (circle or underline one)  1  2  3  4

2. Which components do you use and/or have your students use? (circle or underline all that apply)

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<td>Textbook</td>
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<td>Workbook</td>
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3. How many units did you work with last semester? (circle or underline one)

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<th>Units Worked</th>
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4. How many and which lessons (A-D) do you typically use?

5. Do you usually use whole lessons? Or do you pick and choose specific activities from each lesson? Please explain your answer.

6. How often do you use the book in class (about what percentage of class time)?

7. How do you supplement the textbook and related materials, if you do so?

8. In your opinion, and with respect to this teaching setting, what are the greatest strengths of Four Corners? What are the weaknesses?

9. What is your perception of students’ feelings/thoughts about the book overall? On what do you base this perception?

10. Do the book and related materials personalize the content sufficiently? Do they make it relevant to students’ lives? Please explain your answer.

11. What will you change (if anything) with respect to your use of the book in the future?

For Questions 12-16, please refer to the complete list of Freshman English Goals and Objectives at the end of this document. Rate how well you think Four Corners addresses each of the overall Freshman English goals below.

12. The primary course goal of FE: for students to develop their English conversation ability (circle or underline one)

   | Not at all | Partly | Mostly | Completely |
---|-----------|--------|--------|------------|

Comments:

13. Goal #1: Students will develop skills to adapt to FE classroom culture (circle or underline one)

   | Not at all | Partly | Mostly | Completely |
---|-----------|--------|--------|------------|

Comments:

14. Goal #2: Students will improve their English communication skills (circle or underline one for each skill); please feel free to comment on any or all of the four aspects of this goal below.

   Speaking:  Not at all  Partly  Mostly  Completely
   Listening: Not at all  Partly  Mostly  Completely
   Reading:   Not at all  Partly  Mostly  Completely
   Writing:   Not at all  Partly  Mostly  Completely

Comments:
15. **Goal #3**: Students will improve their abilities to interact with people from other cultures (circle or underline one)

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Comments:

16. **Goal #4**: Students will develop skills to express critical thinking in English (circle or underline one)

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<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Partly</th>
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Comments:

**Note**: The full text of Asia University Freshman English Goals and Objectives were attached here to the original questionnaire.