The Rhetorical Structure Approach:  
The Role of Discourse Signaling Cues in L2 Reading Comprehension

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L2 research often discusses the importance of learning from context for reading comprehension, yet we do not share a well-defined interpretation of what the term “context” means, among which “a more general discourse expectation ability” – the prediction of where a text will go and how it will be organized, is the one of the definitions by William Grabe and Fredricka L. Stoller (2006: 74). Even the few existing studies provide inconsistent support for the beneficial effects of discourse signaling cues on L2 reading comprehension. The current study examined the effects of discourse signaling cues on L2 learners’ reading comprehension from the rhetorical structure approach, facilitating the overall reading comprehension. The study involved 65 fourth-year Chinese undergraduates learning English as a foreign language. Of the 65 learners, half learned the reading texts with discourse signaling cues explicitly explained (i.e., signaled group), and the other half learned the same reading texts without such explicit explanation (i.e., non-signaled group). Because of the extra attention and explicit instruction paid to signal words, students are likely to develop a specific ability to pick up clues that will signal how information is organized and what is important in a text. At the same time, the teacher will learn about different ways for bringing signal words to the conscious attention of students, thereby expanding the teacher’s repertoire of teaching techniques.

Keywords: the rhetorical structure approach; discourse signaling cues; L2 reading comprehension

Introduction

Among the main themes in the literature on the role of discourse signaling cues in L2 reading comprehension, the literature is mainly descriptive (Yao Ximing, 2006; Cheng Xiaotang, 2005; Dymock 1999; Grabe & Gardner 1995). This paper describes an action research project conducted over the last two years which looks at the effects of discourse signaling cues on L2 learners’ reading comprehension from the rhetorical structure approach. More specifically, the project involves the efforts of the author, as a reflective practitioner, to train students to be more efficient readers, and to enhance the efficacy of the author’s teaching strategies through the rhetorical structure approach in L2 reading comprehension.

The goal of the project, however, is not simply to bring about change but also to enhance our understanding of the learning processes of our students. Based on certain assumptions about the role of discourse signaling cues in L2 reading comprehension, plans for alterations were made and implemented, and the consequences of these changes were observed and reflected upon. The cyclical repetition of planning, action, observation, and reflection is the methodology of qualitative action research (Dick, 1992; Nunan, 1993; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). The research was conducted in the classroom through lesson plans, teaching log entries, and pre-and post-tests. Feedback from students was carried out by formal questionnaires as well as informal discussions. The project thus fits into the model of action research.
It is hoped that this project will provide useful insights into the teaching of the course of advanced reading, particularly at the fourth-year EFL Chinese undergraduate level. It is also hoped that it will inspire theoretical research aimed at understanding the learning processes of our students in the field of foreign language pedagogy.

**Theoretical Framework**

Several assumptions underlie the theoretical framework of the research. Firstly, we assume that reading is a multivariate skill involving a combination and integration of a variety of cognitive, linguistic, and nonlinguistic skills ranging from the very basic low-level processing ability in decoding print and encoding visual configuration to the high-level skill of syntax, semantics, and discourse, and to a still higher-order knowledge of text presentation and the integration of ideas with the reader’s global knowledge. According to Grabe and Stoller (2006:25), “the most fundamental higher-level comprehension process is the coordination of ideas from a text that represent the main points and supporting ideas to form a meaning representation of the text”, which they termed as “a text model of reading comprehension”, and which claims that L2 readers parse text into smaller units such as words, phrases, and clauses, based on lexical and syntactic information available, and then incrementally integrate them into a larger discourse context (Freck-Mestre & Pynte, 1997; Hoover & Dwivedi, 1998; Juffs & Harrington, 1995).

Previous studies have generally shown that signaling cues aid L1 and L2 readers in text processing, an interactive activity, involving both top-down and bottom-up processing (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Carrell, 1983; Grabe, 1991). Top-down processing allows readers to develop expectations about text structures and meanings by using prior knowledge as part of the comprehension process. Through top-down processing, readers utilize real world knowledge and refer to various types of schemata that help them predict what will follow in the discourse. Bottom-up processing involves decoding specific linguistic input, helping readers construct meaning from input and modify their pre-existing knowledge based on the linguistic input from the text. These top-down and bottom-up types of processing operate in an interactive, reciprocal way and complement each other at all levels of analysis simultaneously (Grabe, 1991; Nuttall, 2002; Field, 2003; Grabe & Stoller, 2006).

**Rationale: Why Teach Reading through the Rhetorical Structure Approach?**

Nowadays, few teachers are prepared to teach students how to make use of discourse signaling cues to build comprehension, though it is a widely accepted fact that discourse signaling knowledge is important for reading (Grabe, et al. 2006: 80). Yet, L2 readers need to learn to recognize and use discourse signaling cues so as to facilitate understanding of the reading text. According to Nuttall (2002: 106), “if you can identify the principle by which the text is organized and see how the ideas hang together”, this is particularly helpful to readers who have to tackle more difficult texts. Organization of the text is often indicated by discourse signaling cues. These are metalinguistic devices that function as directional guides to signal how readers should interpret the incoming
information (Tyler, 1994). In Grabe and Stoller’s (2006: 80) words, discourse signaling cues are *text signaling devices* and *discourse organization*. Text signaling devices include the use of text signals, such as pronouns, definite articles, repetitions of words and synonyms, words that highlight informational organization (e.g. first, second, however, on the one hand, and on the other hand, in contrast, etc.), and transitional words, phrases, and sentences that connect sentences and parts of sentences together. Then, *discourse organization* refers more broadly to larger units of text, and how they are organized and how they can be recognized. There are words or cues that signal cause and effect, comparison and contrast, conclusion, continuation, emphasis, examples, hedging, sequence, time, space, non-word emphasis (e.g. bold type, exclamation point, italics, etc.) and so forth. Students can benefit from explicit instruction that focuses on the identification of signaling cues and their functions. Furthermore, they can pick up cues for signaling information and discourse organization, which are used to regulate the amount of information presented in the text as well as the ways in which the new information is introduced, and which in turn contribute to reading comprehension, particularly with more difficult texts.

In the one-semester teaching, I realized that there were certain categories, such as sequence and cause-and-effect signal markers which were most important perceptually though other categories of signal words could also be found in the reading text book students used. Therefore, to make this action research project manageable, only two categories (specifically, sequence and cause-and-effect signal markers) will be explored. Future action research projects can focus on other categories, thus to help develop students’ ability to identify the important signal markers, which is critical for effective reading.

**Methods of the Research**

In doing the action research project, I felt very much encouraged by the affirmation of Nunan (1992: 18), who stated that any action research is worthwhile “if it is initiated by a question, is supported by data and interpretation, and it is carried out by a practitioner investigating aspects of his or her own context of situation.” The present research was initiated by three basic research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What is the effect of signaling cues of on students’ reading comprehension?

*Research Question 2:* What is the effect of signaling cues of cause-and-effect on students reading comprehension?

*Research Question 3:* What is the effect if the teacher resorts to the rhetorical structure approach in explicitly teaching signal cues in reading comprehension?

*Hypothesis 1:* Students in the signaled group comprehend significantly more information if extra attention is given in the instruction of the signaling cues of sequence than those in the non-signaled group.

*Hypothesis 2:* Students in the signaled group comprehend significantly more information if extra attention is given in the instruction of the signaling cues of cause-and-effect than those in the non-signaled group.
Hypothesis 3: The teacher will learn about the different ways for bringing signal words to the conscious attention of students, thereby expanding the teacher’s repertoire of teaching techniques.

Subjects

The participants of the research were 65 third year English major students at a tertiary normal university in China. They were from two parallel classes of the same grade of 2003 the author taught. Group One consisted of 32 students, while Group Two consisted of 33 students. They had similar educational backgrounds and had all been in the same university for three years. Most of them were of intermediate level of English language proficiency. None had previously been abroad either to travel or to study English.

Materials

Two level-appropriate reading passages were chosen, one for the pre-test and one for the post-test. Both passages have numerous examples of sequence and cause-and-effect signal words. The reading text chosen in the pre-test is the article entitled The Invisible Poor from A New English Course (Book V) by Li Guanyi (2004: 45-48). It is an exposition that one reads for information. The author, Michael Harrington, develops his ideas by the cause-and-effect pattern. And the reading text chosen for the post-test is entitled Fear of Dearth by Carll Tucker from A New English Course (Book VII) by Li Guanyi (1997: 190-192), which is very similar in the development and organization as The Invisible Poor. The full texts of both passages are given in Appendix B and C.

Generally speaking, there are two ways to organize and develop the ideas: the cause or causes are introduced at the beginning of the paper, and the effect or effects follow; or, sometimes the order of the cause and the effect may be reversed – instead of giving a simple cause or listing a number of causes, the effect is introduced at the beginning of the paper. Then various causes are put forward to explain why/how the effect is produced (Ding, 2001: 101). Such is the organization of the multi-causes and the single effect in The Invisible Poor.

In order to have a clearer picture, we may first look at the outline of the article being used in the pre-test and how the author, Michael Harrington, develops his ideas:

In the reading text, Harrington indicates that the invisibility of the poor in the United States is an undeniable fact, but why is this so? He enumerates succinctly the various causes which can be classified into three categories. To explain in greater detail the causes of the first two main causes, the author then lists some sub-causes as seen in the following outline:

1. The normal and obvious causes of the invisibility of the poor:
   1) Poverty is often off the beaten track.
   2) Beauty and myths are marks of poverty.
2. A new kind of blindness about poverty:
   1) Transformation of the American city isolates the poor from sight of others.
   2) Well-meaning ignorance keeps concerned and sympathetic Americans from knowing the truth about the poor.
3) Mass production enables the best-dressed poverty to exist.

4) Many of the poor are the wrong age to be seen.

Political invisibility – the dispossessed at the bottom of society cannot speak for themselves.

Another remarkable feature of Harrington’s writing is his abundant use of transitional words and expressions – the “signaling cues”, i.e., those words and phrases usually used at the beginning of a sentence or a paragraph to indicate the semantic relation between consecutive sentences or paragraphs. In order for the reader to follow more easily the train of thought of the writer and thus to perceive more easily the coherence of the writing and get the gist of the reading passage, Harrington uses some “signaling cues” at the beginning of the passage. One point that our students may notice is the use of some pronouns, especially the demonstrative pronouns this and that (also their plural forms these and those). Also, some adverbs used at the beginning of a paragraph (as shown in the following outline and the explanation), also have an important role to play in joining the paragraphs, thus enhancing the coherence and comprehension.

Para. 5: Then, too …

The word “too” indicates furthermore. In this case, it tells the reader what the paragraph deals with is similar to what has been dealt with in the previous paragraph. That fact is, in this paragraph, we find another perennial reason why poverty is invisible in America.

Para. 6: These are normal and obvious causes of the invisibility of the poor.

The pronoun “these” can point both backward and forward. In this case it points backward, i.e. “these” refer to the perennial reasons that have been explained in the previous two paragraphs.

Para. 8: Now the American city has been transformed.

“Now” indicates a change of direction. The writer is going to turn from the “perennial” to the “present”.

Para. 9: In short …

“In short” is used to summarize. What follows is a brief summary of what has just been said, i.e. the effect urban development has on the invisibility of the poor.

Para. 10: This new segregation …

“This new segregation” refers to the segregation of the poor from the affluent mentioned in the two previous paragraphs. The segregation is “new” because there has been the “old” notorious segregation of the colored people from the white.

Para. 11: The irony in this …

The words “this” in “The irony in this” refers to the last sentence of the last paragraph, i.e. “There is a warm feeling of satisfaction, of pride in the way things are working out; the poor, it is obvious, are being taken care of”. Can they be taken care of when they are even invisible?

Para. 12: This is an extremely important factor …

“This” in “This is an extremely important factor …” refers to the last sentence of the last paragraph, i.e. “Even people with terribly depressed incomes can look prosperous.”

Para. 13: Then …

The word “then” here has nothing to do with its basic meaning, i.e. a specific point of time earlier in the past or in the future. Here it is used in the sense of
“besides”, showing that there is another reason why the poor are invisible.

**Para. 15: And finally …**

“And finally” here is, as usual, used to show that we have come to the last point in our exposition. Here the writer is going to tell us that the poor are not only materially and emotionally invisible, but they are also politically invisible, i.e. their voice is not heard.

The article used in the post-test, *Fear of Dearth*, discusses a variety of causes of jogging.

The author develops his ideas by presenting the causes from the least serious to the most serious, i.e. from those of his own causes to those of the people around him; from those of common people to those of the theorists; and from those of individual people to those of the whole public and finally goes back to his personal suggestions.

From the outline of the text below, we may have a clearer picture of how the author tries to present his ideas to the readers:

1. The causes of jogging for the author and the people around him:
   1) The cause for the author: there’s no dry shortcut home;
   2) The causes for those people around the author:
      A. to lower blood pressure;
      B. to escape the telephone or cranky spouse or a filthy household;
      C. to avoid doing anything; and
      D. to dodge a decision.

2. The causes of jogging suggested by theorists:
   1) Economists: Jogging is cheap, that’s why it is popular;
   2) Philosophers: Jogging helps strengthen the jogger’s sense of discipline, which is slackening in the modern world.
      A. The lack of discipline is mainly due to:
         a. a shorter work week; and
         b. less Sunday worship.
      B. Technology helps people to enjoy greater freedom.

3. Theologists: Jogging helps make one fit and prolong one’s life, which one must treasure for one no longer believes in the existence of another life after death. The overall causes of jogging the author mentions as the key causes at the end of the whole passages are:
   1) Jogging serves as a punishment which we think we deserve for what we have done to the natural world.
   2) Jogging serves as a gesture of our good will about preservation of dwindling natural resources including our own health.

In this passage, there are also some transitional words to indicate sequence, as shown in the following outline and explanation:

**Paragraph 3: For any trend, there are as many reasons …**

“There are as many reasons” indicates the author is going to tell the reader the reasons coming from people around him – the four subordinate reasons listed in this paragraph.

**Paragraph 4: Beyond these…**

The author in this paragraph is probing into causes deeper than the ones mentioned
in the previous paragraphs.

**Paragraph 8: All of these theorists…**

The phrase “All of these theorists …” refers to the opinions from economists, philosophers, and theologists in the previous three paragraphs.

**Paragraph 9: But I have hunch there’s a further explanation…**

From the word “further”, the reader will know that the author is going to present his own point of view – pointing out the two key causes of jogging as the conclusion: jogging serves as a gesture of our good will about preservation of dwindling natural resources including our own health and a punishment which we think we deserve for what we have done to the natural world as well.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The action research project took approximately one semester. Four types of data were collected for the purpose of the research project: pre-test and post-test, questionnaire, informal interview, and teaching log. The pre-test was administrated before the project started, while the post-test was done at the end of the semester. After the end of the course, the teacher conducted interviews with individual volunteers, asking for explanations of personal responses, a possibility not gained from questionnaire. Interviews were held in a friendly, informal style in the interviewees’ preferred language, generally in Mandarin Chinese, and the interviewer took brief notes. In addition, data were collected through a teaching log as reflections by the teacher throughout the project.

In the pre-test, students in both groups were given the article *The Invisible Poor*, which includes sequence and cause and effect markers. Students were asked to read over the text and underline the sequence markers (i.e. words or phrases that signal a special order of the ideas) and circle the cause and effect markers (i.e. words or phrases that signal main and subordinate causes or effects). The reading activity was served as a pre-test and an indicator of student familiarity with sequence and cause and effect markers. As the semester progressed after the pre-test, the two groups of students would be treated differently in the reading class. The signaled group was the treatment group, and the students were taught to focus on sequence and cause and effect as they emerged in class readings. They were taught to pay special attention to the markers by identifying them, discussing them and exploring the textual functions as they were found. The non-signaled group was the control group and was taught in the regular way, with no extra attention being paid to the points mentioned in the signaled group.

In the signaled group, students were asked to keep a running list of the markers that they encountered in their notebooks, which were collected twice a month to make sure that their lists were accurate; they were also asked to compare lists with an eye toward identifying markers that they should add to their own lists. After four months when students had encountered markers mentioned above several times in several reading texts in the class reading, the teacher then administrated a post-test.

The post-test was similar to the pre-test, in that students in the two groups were given the reading passage and asked to underline sequence markers and cause and effect markers. In the post-test, students were also asked to explain the function of each signal word that they encountered on a separate piece of paper.
Data Analysis and Discussion

The same scoring criterion was used in the assessment of the pre- and post-test. In both tests, students were asked to spot the signaling markers of sequence and cause and effect. If they had the correct answer one point would be scored, with the total of 18 points in each test (in the pre-test, there were 9 signaling cues of cause-and-effect, and 9 signaling cues of sequence, while in the post-test, there were 14 signaling cues of cause-and-effect, and 4 signaling cues of sequence, as seen in the outlines above). Students’ explanation of the signaling cues in the post-test was not scored in both groups. But the teacher suggested that the students in the signaled group keep their explanation in the running list of their notebooks.

The results of the pre- and post-test from both the signaled group and non-signaled group were compared. The following graph shows the results of the two groups of students in identifying the signaling markers that indicate sequence and cause and effect in the pre- and post-test:

![Test Scores of Pre- and Post-test](image)

Test Scores of Pre- and Post-test

It can be noticed that the two groups of students performed almost the same in the pre-test in identifying the sequence and cause and effect markers in the reading text, while in the post-test, the signaled group performed better than those of the non-signaled group in general terms, which might be mainly due to the rhetorical structure approach – the explicit teaching of discourse signaling cues in reading classes. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that the extra attention given in the instruction of the signaling cues of sequence and cause-and-effect did play a part in the improvement in reading comprehension achieved by the signaled group.

To gather further data pertaining to Research Questions 1 and 2, which address the effects of signaling cues on students’ reading comprehension, follow-up questionnaires as well as interviews were carried out after the post-test. The 10 questions in the questionnaires mainly concerned the students’ attitude about the explicit instruction of the signaling cues in teaching reading texts and their achievement in the reading comprehension. The signaled groups responded positively about the explicit instruction
of textual markers, indicating the approach has worked efficiently in the reading class. Then 5 volunteers in both groups were interviewed to get the students’ detailed feedback about the whether the rhetoric structure approach – the explicit instruction of textual markers in teaching reading, emphasizing the role of signaling cues in reading comprehension – should be practiced in reading class. The students in the signaled group advocated the approach and hoped that the implementation of the approach should be run throughout their four-year reading class, while the students in non-signaled group suggested that the teacher teach them explicitly the textual markers so as to raise the overall quality of reading comprehension.

In the process of the action research project, the teacher kept the teaching log, following the format provided by Hancock and Settle (quoted from Wallace, 1998: 59), which consisted of some administrative details, such as class, date, followed by some notes made before the lesson on objectives, planned outcomes and particular points for attention. The log was written up during the lesson or shortly after. Special attention was given by the researcher to reflection on teaching signaling cues. For example, in the first month, students were not quite aware of the importance of the function of signaling cues even though the teacher explained almost all the cues in the text. The teacher then tried to stimulate students to read in a more global manner rather keeping their eyes on individual cues. In the second month, the teacher tried to use a brainstorm activity, drawing students’ attention to a bigger discourse. In the third month, the teacher encouraged students to find cues by drawing an outline of the texts. In the last month, the students could find the cues and explain their functions easily as well, with the teacher to provide prompt help if needed in the classroom teaching. From the teaching log, the teacher has learned a lot about the different ways of bringing signal words to the conscious attention of students, believing firmly in the efficacy of the approach in teaching reading class.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study has demonstrated that signaling cues play a significant role in L2 reading comprehension and it provides additional support for their beneficial effect. The signaled group, which was instructed with explicit explanation of signal cues, performed significantly better in identifying and explaining the textual functions of sequence and cause and effect markers than the non-signaled group, instructed without such an explicit explanation of the signal cues and their textual functions in the reading texts. The current findings that the signaled group had better comprehension of the reading texts should not be surprising. On the one hand, in the signaled lecture, explicit explanations oriented the students to the overall discourse structure and served as important signposts for the students in incorporating the information into the discourse of the reading texts. On the other hand, the students of the non-signaled students were denied such benefits; the information was presented without being explicitly previewed, explained, explored, or summarized. The absence of explicit teaching of these cues seemed to contribute significantly to the insufficient comprehension of the information in the reading text by the non-signaled group of learners.

A number of areas for future research can be suggested from the current study. First, one should examine the individual effects of various types of cues on students’
comprehension of high- versus low-level information in the text. Second, it is necessary to investigate long-term as well as short-term effects of signaling cues on L2 reading comprehension by administering both delayed and immediate assessments. Third, future research should examine the effects of signaling cues on reading comprehension by learners with varying reading proficiency. Fourth, one should examine the role of signaling cues in different text types such as expository versus narrative texts. Finally, future studies should expand investigation of the effects of these cues on learners with differing familiarity with the topics of the reading text. For example, one could compare the effects of signaling cues on students’ reading comprehension of familiar versus unfamiliar topics. It is hoped that insights from the current study will pave the way for a more active research agenda in L2 reading and may serve as a springboard for future research in the L2 reading field for students of different levels.

References:


Appendix A: End-of-Course Questionnaire June 2006

The following information will help me in the research. I will use your answers to evaluate this year’s course and consider improvement for the future. The information you give will NOT be used to evaluate you as a student. Thank you! I appreciate your cooperation.

Please give your honest response by circling the appropriate number.
0 = nothing, 1 = a bit, 2 = quite a lot, and 3 = very much
Circle your group: S = signaled group, N = non-signaled group

1. Do you think explicit teaching of signaling cues in reading comprehension is necessary? 0 1 2 3
2. How important are the signaling cues in your comprehending a reading passage? 0 1 2 3
3. Do you hope the teacher will explain the text structure with signaling cues before you start reading a passage? 0 1 2 3
4. Do you hope that you can analyze the text structure with signaling cues indicating more than sequence and cause-and-effect, such as comparison and contrast, conclusion, continuation, emphasis, examples, hedging, time, space, non-word emphasis and so forth by yourself at the end of the reading course? 0 1 2 3
5. Do you feel satisfied with your performance/achievement in the course? 0 1 2 3
6. Have you ever been able to apply what you learnt in the reading course in your extensive reading after class? 0 1 2 3
7. How can you judge the teacher’s explicit teaching of signaling cues in reading comprehension? 0 1 2 3
8. If you could choose one thing that helped you learn the most in the course, what would you say? Try to be as specific as possible.
9. What would you change about this course if you had the chance to do it again? What would you hope your teacher do, to teach you explicitly the signaling cues in helping you to learn the most from the course?
10. What suggestions you would to make to yourself as an effective reader in your future reading?

Thank you!

P.S. Would you be willing to take part in a brief interview with your teacher about your experience in the course? If so, please leave an e-mail address or telephone number so that I may contact you to arrange an appointment.
Appendix B: Reading Text for Pre-Test

The Invisible Poor

Michael Harrington

The millions who are poor in the United States tend to become increasingly invisible. Here is a great mass of people, yet it takes an effort of the intellect and will even to see them.

I discovered this personally in a curious way. After I wrote my first article on poverty in America, I had all the statistics down on paper. I had proved to my satisfaction that there were around 50,000,000 poor in this country. Yet, I realized I did not believe my own figures. The poor existed in the Government reports; they were percentages and numbers in long, close columns, but they were not part of my experience. I could prove that the other America existed, but I had never been there.

There are perennial reasons that make the other America an invisible land. Poverty is often off the beaten track. It always has been. The ordinary tourist never left the main highway, and today he rides interstate turnpikes. He does not go into the valleys of Pennsylvania where the towns look like movies sets of Wales in the thirties. He does not see the company houses in rows, the rutted roads (the poor always have bad roads whether they live in the city, in towns, or on farms), and that everything is black and dirty. And even if he were to pass through such a place by accident, the tourist would not meet the unemployed men in the bar or the women coming home from a runaway sweatshop.

Then, too, beauty and myths are perennial masks of poverty. The traveler comes to the Appalachians in the lovely season. He sees the hills, the streams, the foliage – but not the poor. Or perhaps he looks at a run-down mountain house and, remembering Rousseau rather than seeing with his eyes, decides that “those people” are truly fortunate to be living the way they are and that they are lucky to be exempt from the strains and tensions of the middle class. The only problem is that “those people,” the quaint inhabitants of those hills, are undereducated, under-privileged, lack medical care, and are in the process of being forced from the land into a life in the cities, where they are misfits.

These are normal and obvious causes of the invisibility of the poor. They operated a generation ago; they will be functioning a generation hence. It is more important to understand that the very development of American society is creating a new kind of blindness about poverty. The poor are increasingly slipping out of the very experience and consciousness of the nation.

If the middle class never did like ugliness and poverty, it was at least aware of them. “Across the tracks” was not a very long way to go. There were forays into the slums at Christmas time; there were charitable organizations that brought contact with the poor. Occasionally, almost everyone passed through the Negro ghetto or the blocks of tenements, if only to get downtown to work or to entertainment.

Now the American city has been transformed. The poor still inhabit the miserable housing in the central area, but they are increasingly isolated from contact with, or sight of, anybody else. Middle class women coming in from Suburia on a rate trip may catch the merest glimpse of the other America on the way to an evening at the theater, but their children are segregated in suburban schools. The business or professional man may drive
along fringes of slums in a car or bus, but it is not an important experience to him. The failures, the unskilled, the disabled, the aged, and the minorities are right there, across the tracks, where they have always been. But hardly anyone else is.

In short, the very development of the American city has removed poverty from the living, emotional experience of millions upon millions of middle-class Americans. Living out in the suburbs, it is easy to assume that ours is, indeed, an affluent society.

This new segregation of poverty is compounded by a well-meaning ignorance. A good many concerned and sympathetic Americans are aware that there is much discussion of urban renewal. Suddenly, driving through the city, they notice that a familiar slum has been torn down and that there are towering, modern buildings where once there had been tenements or hovels. There is a warm feeling of satisfaction, of pride on the way things are working out; the poor, it is obvious, are being taken care of.

The irony in this … is that the truth is nearly the exact opposite to the impression. The total impact of the various housing programs in postwar America has been squeezing more and more people into existing slums, … clothes made the poor invisible too: America has the best-dressed poverty the world has never known. For a variety of reasons, the benefits of mass production have been spread much more evenly in this area than in many others. It is much easier in the United States to be decently housed, fed, or doctored. Even people with terribly depressed incomes can look prosperous.

This is an extremely important factor in defining our emotional and existential ignorance of poverty. In Detroit the existence of social classes became much more difficult to discern the day the companies put lockers in the plants. From that moment on, one did not see men in work clothes on the way to the factory, but citizens in slacks and white shirts. This process has been magnified with the poor throughout the country. There are tens of thousands of Americans in the big cities who are wearing shoes, perhaps even a stylishly cut suit or dress, and yet are hungry. It is not a matter of planning, though it almost seems as if the affluent society had given out costumes to the poor so that they would not offend the rest of the society with the sight of rags.

Then, many of the poor are the wrong age to be seen. A good number of them (over 8,000,000) are sixty-five years of age or better; an even larger number are under eighteen. The aged numbers of the other America are often sick, and they cannot move. Another group of them live out their lives in loneliness and frustration: they sit in rented rooms, or else they stay close to a house in a neighborhood that has completely changed from the old days. Indeed, one of the worst aspects of poverty among the aged is that these people are out of sight and out of mind, and alone.

The young are somewhat more visible, yet they too stay close to their neighborhoods. Sometimes they advertise their poverty through a lurid tabloid story about a gang killing. But generally they do not disturb the quiet streets of the middle class.

And finally, the poor are politically invisible. It is one of the cruelest ironies of social life in advanced countries that the dispossessed at the bottom of society are unable to speak for themselves. The people of the other America do not, by far and large, belong to unions, to fraternal organizations, or to political parties. They are without lobbies of their own; they put forward no legislative program. As a group, they are atomized. They have no face; they have no voice.

Thus, there is not even a cynical political motive for caring about the poor, as in the
old days. Because the slums are no longer centers for powerful organizations, the politicians need not really care about their inhabitants. The slums are no longer visible to the middle class, so much of the idealistic urge for those who need help is gone. Only the social agencies have a really direct involvement with the other America, and they are without any great political power.

To the extent that the poor have a spokesman in American life, that role is played by the labor movement. The unions have their own particular idealism, an ideology of concern. More than that, they realize that the existence of a reservoir of cheap, unorganized labor is a menace to wages and working conditions throughout the entire economy. Thus, many union legislative proposals – to extend the coverage of minimum wage and social security, to organize migrant farm laborers – articulate the needs of the poor.

That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them. They are not simply neglected and forgotten as in the old rhetoric of reform: what is much worse, they are not seen.

From: H. Knepler and M. Knepler, pp. 221-224
Appendix C: Reading Text for Post-Test

Fear of Dearth

Carll Tucker

I hate jogging. Every dawn, as I thud around New York City's Central Park reservoir, I am reminded of how much I hate it. It's so tedious. Some claim jogging is thought conducive; others insist the scenery relieves the monotony. For me, the pace is wrong for contemplation of either ideas or vistas. While jogging, all I can think about is jogging -- or nothing. One advantage of jogging around a reservoir is that there's no dry shortcut home.

From the listless looks of some fellow trotters, I gather I am not alone in my unenthusiasm: Bill-paying, it seems, would be about as diverting. Nonetheless, we continue to jog; more, we continue to choose to jog. From a practically infinite array of opportunities, we select one that we don't enjoy and can't wait to have done with. Why?

For any trend, there are as many reasons as there are participants. This person runs to lower his blood pressure. That person runs to escape the telephone or a cranky spouse or a filthy household. Another person runs to avoid doing anything else, to dodge a decision about how to lead his life or a realization that his life is leading nowhere. Each of us has his carrot and stick. In my case, the stick is my slackening physical condition, which keeps me from beating opponents at tennis whom I overwhelmed two years ago. My carrot is to win.

Beyond these disparate reasons, however, lies a deeper cause. It is no accident that now, in the last third of the 20th century, personal fitness and health have suddenly become a popular obsession. True, modern man likes to feel good, but that hardly distinguishes him from his predecessors.

With zany myopia, economists like to claim that the deeper cause of everything is economic. Delightfully, there seems no marketplace explanation for jogging. True, jogging is cheaper, but then not jogging is cheaper. And the scant and skimpy equipment which jogging demands must make it a marketer's least favored form of recreation.

Some scoutmasterish philosophers argue that the appeal of jogging and other body-maintenance programs is the discipline they afford. We live in a world in which individuals have fewer and fewer obligations. The work week has shrunk. Weekend worship is less compulsory. Technology gives us more free time. Satisfactorily filling free time requires imagination and effort. Freedom is a wide and risky river; it can drown the person who does not know how to swim across it. The more obligations one takes on, the less threat freedom poses. Jogging can become an instant obligation. For a portion of his day, the jogger is not his own man; he is obedient to a regimen he has accepted.

Theologists may take the argument one step further. It is our modern irreligion, our lack of confidence in any hereafter, that makes us anxious to stretch our mortal stay as long as possible. We run, as the saying goes, for our lives, hounded by the suspicion that these are the only lives we are likely to enjoy.

All of these theorists seem to me more or less right. As the growth of cults and charismatic religions and the resurgence of enthusiasm for the military draft suggest, we
do like commitment. And who can doubt, watching so many middle-aged and older persons torturing themselves in the name of fitness, that we are unreconciled to death, more so perhaps than any generation in modern memory?

But I have the hunch there's a further explanation of our obsession with exercise. I suspect that what motivates us even more than a fear of death is that our era is the first to anticipate the eventual depletion of all natural resources. We see wilderness shrinking; rivers losing their capacity to sustain life; the air, even the stratosphere, being loaded with potentially deadly junk. We see the irreplaceable being squandered, and in the depths of our consciousness we are fearful that we are creating an uninhabitable world. We feel more or less helpless and yet, at the same time, desirous to protect what resources we can. We recycle soda bottles and restore old buildings and protect our nearest natural resource – our physical health – in the almost superstitious hope that such small gestures will help save an earth that we are blighting. Jogging becomes a sore of penance for our sins of gluttony, greed, and waste. Like a hairshirt or a bed nails, the more one hates it, the more virtuous it makes one feel.

That is why we jog. Why I jog is to win at tennis.

From: J. S. Steward, pp. 253-255