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Reading Comprehension Techniques Through Broad Contexts of Language

Prakaikaew Pasurapunya
Chulalongkorn University
Language Institute
Bangkok, Thailand

Quite often that teachers of English hear comments from Thai students on the difficulty of vocabulary in reading comprehension. It is understood that reading comprehension involves the knowledge of the language within the sentence and the understanding of the text features beyond the sentence (discourse). The knowledge of the world the reader brings with him also contributes to comprehension.

We note that in an English sentence there will be two basic components-- the content items and the grammatical items.¹ The fact that content items carry a lot of meaning, whereas grammatical items carry little meaning creates an inherent Problem in reading (McEldowney 1982). That is, the students rely very much on content items for comprehension. Facing new content items i.e. unknown vocabulary, the students are likely to fail to understand the text.

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1. The content items are the open-class items i.e. new items can be constantly created. Their meanings can be identified with objects or actions in the real world or the quality or characteristics of the objects or actions. Content items entail noun (John, room etc.), adjective (happy, steady etc.), verb (search, grow etc.) and adverb (steadily, completely etc.) The grammatical items are the closed-class items i.e. it is not really possible to invent new items for this class. Grammatical items entail article (a, an, the), demonstrative (that, this etc.), pronouns (he, they, which etc.), prepositions (of, at etc.), conjunction (and, when etc.), prefixes (dis-, in- etc.), suffixes (-ful, -less etc.), verb forms (stem, stem+s, stem+ed) and plural-noun endings (N+s, N+es)

It is necessary to make the students realize that the knowledge of grammar together with some know content items will help make sense of the text though there exist some unknown vocabulary. Let's have a look at the following sentences.

The *platx* are beautiful. These birds are among the smalles of the *noks*.

Here, *platx*, *beautiful*, *bird*, *small* and *nok* are content items. *Platx*, *bird* and *nok* are objects that can be identified in the real world whereas *beautiful* and *small* are the characteristics of these objects. We can work out that *platx* are birds belonging to the *noks* group because of the prepositions *among* and *of* and the bound morpheme *-est*.

Since the grammatical items are the constant features reoccurring in texts, they seem to be the basic tool for practising comprehension techniques. This article attempts to illustrate developing reading comprehension techniques through broad contexts of language. In the first place, I would like to clarify what broad contexts of language are. Secondly, I will discuss the association of broad contexts with one grammatical item--verb forms--and how broad contexts of language are identified. Then I will state how to develop reading comprehension techniques through broad contexts of language. Finally actual material will be designed under this framework.

Broad Contexts of Language

McEldowney (1982) classifies language into three main types of context according to the writer's purpose or intention to convey his subject matter. The first type of language context is *description*. Here, the purpose of the writer is to describe, in one form or another, the characteristics of the subject matter. The second type of context is *narrative*. The main purpose of narrative is to narrate or to relate a sequence of events which has actually happened. The writer makes clear, in one form or another, the sequence of occurrence. The third context of language is *instruction*. The intention of the writer here is to tell someone, step by step, how to do something making sure that he can follow a sequence of steps.

The Association of Verb Forms and Broad Contexts of Language

The reason that I propose developing comprehension techniques through broad contexts of language is that broad contexts of language are systematically associated with an important grammatical feature--verb form. Since verb and verb form occur in every sentence of English, they could be considered as basic tools for reading comprehension. McEldowney (1976) regards the verb as the most important central feature of the language. First of all, she explains, the verb form can be seen to be the cue for the broad functional contexts of a piece of language. For instance, in the following, a change from general comments on migrations caused by an over-population to specific comments about one particular migration is marked by a change in verb forms. It is marked by a change from stem/stem+s: *are*, *comes*, *exceeds* to the form stem+ed: *grew*, *left*, *moved*, *came*.

Migrations are caused by over-population. Sooner or later, a time comes when the increase of population of a country exceeds its normal food supply. An example of this is China. Beginning in the last century, the Chinese population grew too big for the amount of food available. Because of this thousands of Chinese left China and moved to countries all over the world. Many Chinese came to Thailand.

Secondly, in addition to its form being the pivot of the functional context, the verb can also be seen as the pivot of the English sentence. Most sentences contain a finite verb; and the choice of verb, to a large extent, determines the structure of the sentence. For instance, when the choice is “transitive” verbs, the sentence pattern tends to be (S)VO¹, whereas the sentence pattern (S)V tends to associate with “non-transitive” verbs.

In the broadest sense, McEldowney (1982) associates one verb form to one functional context in order to establish a systematic way of identifying the context of language in reading. The students would be able to identify the general purpose of the writer whether he wants to describe, to narrate or to instruct. These associations are

Form	Context of Language
Finite stem	Instruction
Finite stem+s	Description
Finite stem+ed	Narrative

For example,

Instruction

*To measure, **choose** a blind that is long enough and wide enough for your window. Then **fix** the brackets and **cut** the roller fabric to size. **Reassemble** in moments and simply **slot** the blind into the bracket.*

Description

*The John Rylands University Library of Manchester is one of the largest academic libraries in Britain. It **contains** over three million volumes, huge manuscripts and archival resources holdings in microfilms of several hundred thousands titles. It also **maintains** about eight thousand subscriptions to current periodicals and continuation literature.*

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1. S = Subject
 - V = Verb
 - O = Object
 - C = Complement
 - A = Adverb

Narrative

On a very hot evening in July a young man left his little room at the top of a house in Carpenter Lane. He went out into the street and walked slowly in the direction of Kokushin Bridge.

However, it is not sufficient to use verb form as just one criterion to determine language context. The same form of the verb may occur in more than one context. For instance, the form “stem” may occur in instruction or in general description in present. Similarly, the form “stem+ed” may occur in both narrative and description in the past. Thus, it is necessary to have other criteria to justify the language contexts. These criteria are :

The Sentence Pattern

McEldowney (1976) associates the stem form with the sentence patterns V(Come); VO(Choose a book); VOO(Bring me a book); VOA(Clean the china ware carefully); VA(Walk slowly) in the context of instruction.

She associates the stem/stem+s form with the sentence patterns SVC(Mary is pretty.); SVO (She has a nice house); There VC (There is a cat in the house) in the context of description in the present.

And the sentence patterns SV(O)(A) are associated with the form stem+ed in the context of narrative.

The Type of Verb Whether Dynamic or Stative¹

As we can see that some sentence patterns occur in more than one context. For example, SVO occurs in both description and narrative. Thus, it is necessary to identify whether the verb is dynamic or stative in addition to identifying the verb form and the sentence pattern. It is likely that the verbs in narrative and instruction are dynamic whereas those in description tend to be stative.

The Way the Information is Organized as Sequence or Non-Sequence

In the contexts of instruction and narrative, the information is normally organized in linguistic sequence i.e. one event happens after another. If we reorder the events, the information will change and might not lead to comprehension. On

1. According to Quirk (1973), the dynamic verbs are verbs that allow progressive. They fall into five classes :

1. Activity verbs e.g. drink, write etc.
2. Process verbs e.g. change, grow, widen etc.
3. Verbs of bodily sensation e.g. feel, hurt etc.
4. Momentary verbs e.g. hit, jump, kick etc.

The stative verbs which disallow the progressive fall into two classes :

1. Verbs of inert perception and cognition e.g. like, love, know etc.
2. Relational verbs e.g. be, have, seem, involve etc.

the other hand, the context of description is normally organized as non-sequence. We can rearrange the order of information as long as it is logically sound.

I would like to draw your attention to the context of description, the most widely used context of language. Description does not simply occur in stem+s form of stative verbs. There are many types of descriptions and each comes in different form as follows:

First, a general description

Most toothed whales spend their entire lives in tightly organized schools which may range in numbers from a few animals to 1,000 or more individuals. Baleen Whales are more often found singly, although small schools occur on the breeding grounds, and whales may congregate in feeding areas in considerable numbers. Schools of toothed whales may be quite complex in structure, involving family groups. Groups segregated by age and sex, and even schools composed of two or more species. Groups of mothers with young are usually found together near the centre of a school.

Second, a particular description

Summerhill is a boarding school with a difference. Founded in 1921 by the late A.S. Neill, it is situated in Suffolk, England, about 100 miles from London. Although begun more than 60 years ago, Summerhill still represents an experiment in education that is unique of its kind.

In both cases, there is a high percentage of stative verbs in the stem form (*spend, may, are*) and in the stem-s form (*is, is, represents*). Sentences have subjects and come in patterns SVC, SVO-

Third, a description which occurs in conjunction with a narrative of events

He clenched the twenty copeck piece in his hand, walked on for ten paces, and then turned with his face to the Neva, in the direction of the Palace. There was not a wisp of cloud in the sky, and the water was almost blue. The pain from the whip was gone. It seemed to him as though he were flying away somewhere higher and higher. He suddenly felt the twenty copeck piece in his clenched fist. He opened his hand, stared at the silver coin and flung it with a violent movement into the water. Then he retraced his steps and went home.

This is called a description in the past or narrative padding. It contains stative verbs in the stem+ed form (*was, was, was, seemed, were*).

Apart from these three stative descriptions, there are two other descriptions that can be called dynamic descriptions because they contain dynamic verbs.

One comes in the sentence pattern SVO, SVC in sequence of the stem or stem+s forms of dynamic verbs. For instance,

*The life cycle of a typical annual plant can be divided into several stages. The first stage is germination. In this first stage the primary root, or radicle, **emerges**. Then the stem **pushes** its way upward until it **appears** above the surface of the soil. At the same time the root system **grows** downward, and **begins** to spread through the soil. The seed contains enough food to nourish the seedling until the first leaves are produced. Next, the plant **enters** the stage of rapid growth. The plant **begins** to grow to its full size. When it is mature enough, it **flowers** and pollination and fertilization are ready to take place.*

The other dynamic description comes in the sentence patterns SVC, SVA in sequences of the stem or stem+s forms of passive verb groups. For example,

*There are several stages in the process of milk production before the milk reaches us in a bottle. First, the cows **are milked** either by hand or by machine. Then the fresh milk **is taken** to the dairy where it **is filtered** carefully to remove away specks of dirt or hair. Next, it **is heated** for a time and then **is cooled** quickly to kill any germs. This stage is called pasteurizing. The pasteurized milk then goes into a machine which bottles it automatically and seals the top. The milk is then ready for the milkman to deliver.*

To sum up, we need four criteria to identify broad contexts of Only ??? language. They are the verb form, the sentence pattern, the verb type and the way the information is organized. We can summarize the language contexts and the criteria in the following way.

	Instruction	Narration	General Description	Particular Description	Narrative Padding	Dynamic Description	Dynamic Description
The way the information is organized	Sequenced	Sequenced	Non-sequenced	Non-sequenced	Non-sequenced	Sequenced	Sequenced
Verb type	Dynamic	Dynamic	Stative	Stative	Stative	Dynamic	Stative Dynamic
Verb form	Stem	Stem+ed	Stem Stem+s	Stem Stem+s	Stem+ed	Stem Stem+s	Stem Stem+s of passive verb
Sentence pattern	V(O)(A)	SV(O)(A)	SVO SVC There+VC	SVO SVC There+VC	SVO SVC There+VC	SVO SVC	SVC SVA

How to Develop Reading Comprehension Techniques through Broad Contexts of Language

Developing comprehension techniques through broad contexts of language is introduced to develop understanding of texts gradually, using grammatical items as basic tools to find out information, rather than attempting immediate and absolute comprehension.

Comprehension techniques through broad contexts of language can be developed in the following ways.

1. Focusing attention on verb forms which identify the contexts of language or purposes of writing (whether to describe or to instruct or to narrate), and on verbs which are the central unit around which a sentence is built.
2. Practising reading skills i. e. skimming, scanning, intensive reading and search reading.
3. Practising mental operations in the process of reading comprehension which are :
 - identifying
 - predicting
 - distinguishing
 - classifying
 - ordering
 - synthesising
 - inferring
 - translating

The text used to design material under this framework is taken from the Foundation Reading Coursebook II, Book II, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

Killers in the Air

A plague is attacking the world's cities. It causes people, plants and animals to sicken and die. Masonry crumbles, metal corrodes, and rubber and leather become hard and brittle. The cause of this plague is no strange virus but pollution of the atmosphere. The air carries a startling mixture of substances to harm us.

Most widely publicized of the air pollutants is sulphur dioxide. It is not known if sulphur dioxide by itself has a significant effect on health, but combined with smoke it becomes a poison that can be lethal to plants and people, and combined with smoke can be damaging to buildings and monuments. Public authorities have come to expect an increased human death rate when the level of sulphur dioxide is high for several consecutive days. It also attacks plant life. Both flowers and trees can be damaged and even killed by it. When combined with water vapor in the atmosphere, sulphur dioxide changes to sulphuric acid. It is this that eats away at our buildings, our monuments, even our gravestones.

Another frequently mentioned pollutant is carbon. Like sulphur dioxide it is a product of fuel combustion but unlike sulphur dioxide it is known to be harmful by itself. Soot soils our clothes, penetrates closed windows and gets in our eyes. More than a nuisance, however, soot is known to carry cancer-causing hydrocarbons which attack the protective lining of the lungs.

Odorless and colourless, carbon monoxide released in car exhausts has long been known to be a killer. Like hydrocarbons, it is dangerous in itself, but whereas the effects of hydrocarbon are longer, the effects of carbon monoxide are almost immediate. They prevent the body from getting sufficient oxygen thus causing death.

These are just some of the substances which pollute the atmosphere and attack living and non-living things. The need to tackle this problem is widely recognized and, in some countries, positive action, such as the introduction of smokeless zones and carless zones, has been taken. However, there are many more steps to be taken before pollution in the atmosphere can be reduced to an acceptable level.

Students' Worksheets

Text: Killers in the Air

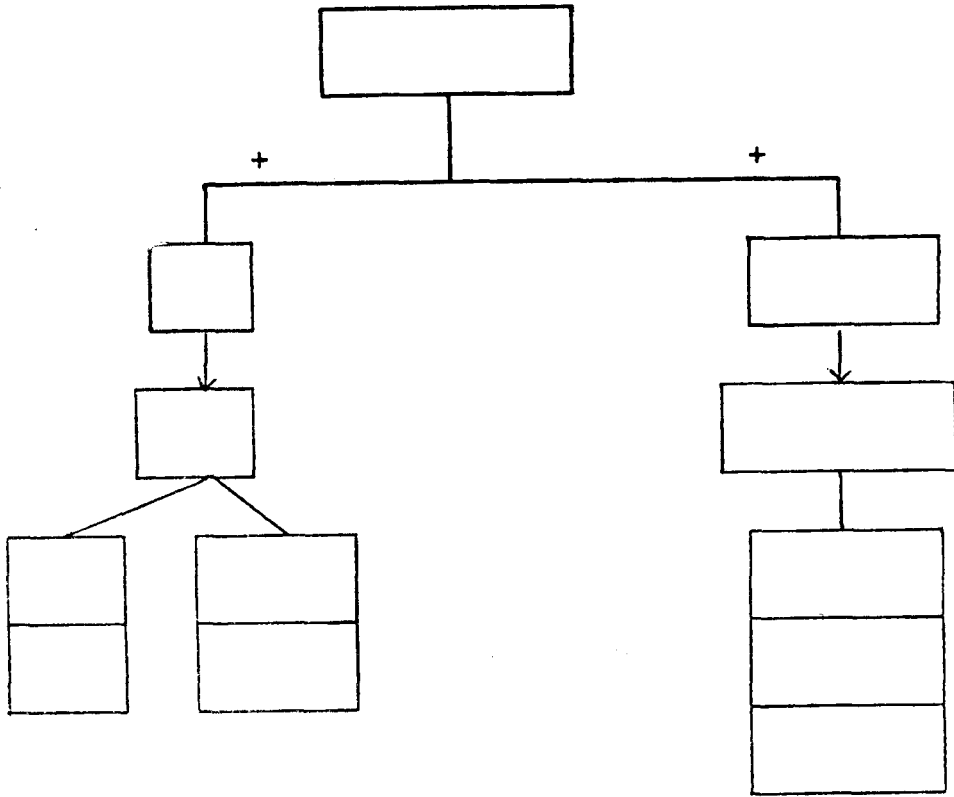
1. The finite verbs of paragraph 1 are
2. Seven things that are affected by a plague are
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.
 - 7.
3. In this context, a *plague* refers to,
4. From paragraphs 2, 3, 4, the air pollutants mentioned are
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
5. From paragraph 2, two things that can be combined with sulphur dioxide are
 - 1.
 - 2.
6. Sulphur dioxide

When combined with smoke	When combined with water vapor
<i>becomes</i>	<i>changes</i>
<i>can</i>	<i>eats away</i>
<i>can</i>	
<i>can</i>	

7. Two examples showing the danger of sulphur dioxide to plants and people are

<p>..... <i>increases.</i></p> <p>..... <i>are destroyed</i></p> <p>..... <i>or killed</i></p>	}	<p>When the level of sulphur dioxide is high for many days.</p>
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8. Complete the diagram



9. Six things that tell us about carbon

Carbon *is*
is
is

e.g. *soil*
penetrates
gets in

carries
attacks
causes

10. Seven things that tell us about carbon monoxide

Carbon monoxide *is*
is
is
is

Its effects *are*
prevents
causes

11. One more thing about sulphur is
is
12. One more thing about hydrocarbon is
are
13. Two ways that have been used to reduce air pollution are
are
are
14. Write a description of the three air pollutants.

Air pollution is harmful to people, plants, animals and causes damages to non-living things. There are three well-known air pollutants. They are _____, _____ and _____.

Sulphur dioxide is a product of fuel burning. It _____ a poison when combined with _____. It _____ and _____ and _____. Sulphur dioxide _____ to sulphuric acid which _____ and _____.

Carbon is also a product of fuel combustion. It _____ by itself. It _____. For example, soot _____, _____ and _____. It _____ which _____ and _____.

Carbon monoxide has no _____ and no _____. It _____ from car exhausts. It _____ in itself. Its effects are _____, _____ the effects of hydrocarbon are _____. It _____. Therefore, it _____.

Teachers' Notes

Assumptions

1. The students know what finite and non-finite verbs are.
2. The students understand the contexts of description, instruction and narrative.

Language description of the text

This text is purely descriptive marked by the stative verb forms stem and stem+s (*is, causes, has, can*) and some dynamic stem+s verbs (*attacks*). The description of the text is non-sequentially organized. There will be no linguistic and content disorder if the writer wants to describe carbon in the second paragraph and sulphur dioxide in the third or fourth paragraphs instead.

Paragraph one is a general introduction of how dangerous air pollution is. It is leading the reader to the specific description of certain air pollutants : sulphur dioxide, carbon and carbon monoxide, These specific descriptions of air pollutants are presented as the development parts of the text. There is a conclusion paragraph restating the main idea of how dangerous air pollution is and mentioning some steps being taken to reduce the problem.

The description of each air pollutant shows the characteristics of the pollutant and its effects toward living and non-living things.

As an introduction, the teacher draws the students' attention to the language context through the verb forms by saying.

1. T. says "Read paragraph 1 quickly and list all the finite verbs."
(Scanning, identifying)

T. elicits the answers. "Tell me the verbs."

*is, causes, crumbles, corrodes,
become, is, carries.*

T. explains "These verbs appear in stem/stem+s forms. Therefore the language context is description, All the finite verbs in the rest of the text come in these forms. So the whole text is a description. Let's see what the writer describes."

2. T. says "Read paragraph 1 again. List 7 things that are affected by a plague." (Scanning, identifying).

1. people
2. plants
3. animals
4. masonry
5. metal
6. rubber
7. leather

3. T. says "Find a phrase of 4 words in this paragraph that refer to a *plague* in this text." (Skimming, identifying)

Pollution of the atmosphere

T. says "or we have another way of saying this which is....?" (Inferring)
air pollution

Vocabulary teaching (brittle, corrode, masonry, crumble)

T. says "Let's see how the 7 things are affected by air pollution."

"people plants, animals are considered living things.

Air pollution can make them....."

Sick and die

“*Masonry, metal, rubber, leather* are considered.....”

Non-living things (Inferring)

“What can air pollution do to rubber and leather? It makes rubber and leather.....”

Become hard and brittle

“When rubber and leather become hard, they are easy to.....”

Break

“So *brittle* means easy to break.” “How about *metal*? What can air pollution do to metal?

It makes metal corrode.

“When we leave metal in the open air for a long time, what happens to it? It becomes.....”

Rusty

“and gradually is.....”

Eaten away, destroyed

“So *corrode* means to be eaten away or destroyed by chemical action.”

“How masonry crumbles?” “Apart from metal, rubber and leather, what is the other non-living thing that can be damaged by air pollution Buildings (especially built with stone)

“What can air pollution do to buildings?”

It makes them break or fall apart.

4. T. says “Read paragraphs 2, 3, 4, quickly and tell me how many air air pollutants are mentioned,” (Scanning, identifying)
Three. They are sulphur dioxide, carbon, carbon monoxide.
5. T. says “Read paragraph 2. Find 2 things that can be combined with sulphur dioxide.” (Skimming, identifying)
Smoke
Water vapor
6. T. says “Read paragraph 2 again. Find 6 things about sulphur dioxide to fill out the following columns.”
(Intensive reading, identifying, distinguishing)

Sulphur dioxide

When combined with smoke	When combined with water vapor
<i>becomes</i> a poison <i>can</i> be lethal to plants <i>can</i> be lethal to people <i>can</i> be damaging to buildings and monuments.	<i>changes</i> to sulphuric acid <i>eats away</i> buildings, monuments and gravestones

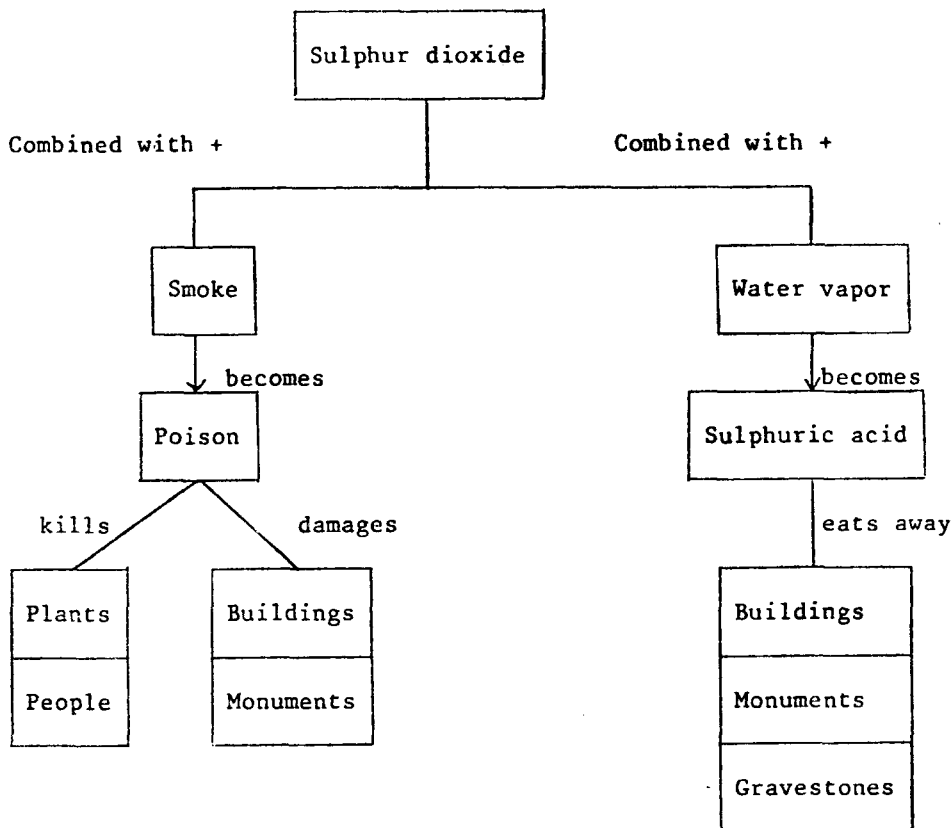
7. T. says "Find two things to show that sulphur dioxide is lethal to plants and people." (Search reading, identifying, vocabulary teaching of the word *lethal*)

Human death rate *increases*.

Flowers and trees *are* destroyed
or killed.

} When the level of sulphur dioxide is high for many days.

8. With the information paragraph 2, complete the following diagram.



9. T. says "Read paragraph 3 and find 6 things that tell us about carbon." (Intensive reading, identifying, inferring).

Carbon *is* a product of a fuel combustion—a process of burning fuel
is harmful by itself.

is a nuisance e.g. soot *soil* clothes,

penetrates closed windows,

gets in eyes.

carries hydrocarbons.

attacks lungs.

causes cancer.

10. T. says "Read paragraph 4 and find 7 things that tell us about carbon monoxide." (Intensive reading, identifying, inferring)

Carbon monoxide *is* odorless.

is colourless.

is released from car exhausts.

is dangerous in itself.

Its effects *are* immediate.

prevents the body from getting enough oxygen.

Thus, *causes* death

11. T. says "Paragraph 3 tells us another thing about sulphur dioxide." (Search reading, distinguishing (Comparison)).

Sulphur dioxide *is* a product of fuel burning.

12. T. says "Paragraph 4 tells us another thing about hydrocarbon." (Search reading, distinguishing (Contrast)).

The effects of hydrocarbon *are* long.

13. T. says "Read paragraph 5 and find two ways that have been used to reduce air pollution." (Skimming, identifying).

Smokeless zones *are* introduced.

Carless zones *are* introduced.

If the teacher wants to take another step further, production stage, oral production can be practised first through the teacher's prompts and the model for written production would be :

Air pollution is harmful to people, plants, animals and causes damage to non-living things. There are three well-known air pollutants. They are *sulphur dioxide*, *carbon* and *carbon monoxide*.

Sulphur dioxide is a product of fuel burning. It *becomes* a poison when combined with smoke. It *can be lethal to people and plants* and *can be damaging to buildings and monuments*. Sulphur dioxide *changes* to sulphuric acid which *eats away buildings, monuments and gravestones*.

Carbon is also a product of fuel combustion. It *is harmful* by itself. It *is a nuisance*. For example, soot *soils clothes, penetrates closed windows and gets in eyes*. It *carries hydrocarbons which attacks lungs and causes cancer*.

Carbon monoxide has no *odor* and no *colour*. It *is released* from car exhausts. It *is dangerous* in itself. Its effects are *immediate, whereas* the effects of hydrocarbon are *longer*. It *prevents the body from getting enough oxygen*. Therefore, it *causes death*.

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