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ORIGINAL PAPER

Reading Between the Lines: Enhancing Critical Thinking and Inferential Skills in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract :
Cultivating robust reading skills is essential for enhancing fluency in the target language, but fluency is not merely the ability to decode words at speed. It is the capacity to construct meaning, interrogate a text's claims and silences, and infer what is meant but left unsaid. This paper advances a principled approach to foreign language (L2) reading that foregrounds inference and critical thinking as the very engines of comprehension. Drawing on cognitive models of understanding, empirical findings in L2 reading, and classroom-tested pedagogy, I argue for teaching that moves beyond comprehension-as-recall toward comprehension-as-construction. The discussion unfolds in five integrated sections: an introduction framing the stakes; a theoretical rationale for inferential reading in an additional language; a pedagogical approach that interweaves extensive exposure with transparent strategy work; an implementation and assessment section that illustrates how principles translate into practice; and a conclusion outlining implications for curriculum and teacher development. Throughout, I incorporate restrained, judicious quotation from the research literature and reference up to seven ResearchGate-accessible sources to anchor key claims.

Keywords: *reading skills, critical thinking, inferential skills, foreign language.*

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Introduction

Reading has long been treated as a multiplier skill in language education. A single well-chosen text can expose learners to hundreds of lexical items and a wide array of grammatical structures embedded in authentic discourse. Yet the promise of reading is only realized when learners go beyond extracting surface facts to assembling a coherent mental model of meaning. Many learners, particularly at intermediate levels, report that they can "get the gist" of an L2 text but still struggle to recognize tone, stance, implication, or the pragmatic pressure points where meaning actually resides. They miss the significance of a concessive pivot, the caution telegraphed by hedging, or an allusion that depends on cultural background. These are not minor slips; they are precisely the places where readers must read between the lines to construe what the text is doing. Against this backdrop of rising interpretive demands in L2 classrooms, Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2020) frame the challenge succinctly: "Teaching a foreign language has uncovered new challenges with the evolution of society and education as a whole." (p.139)

At a cognitive level, comprehension is not the passive reception of information; it is an active, constrained construction. The construction and integration perspective captures this dual process: readers generate tentative interpretations using textual cues and background knowledge, then integrate these interpretations into a coherent whole by satisfying constraints of plausibility and fit. As Gernsbacher (1999, p. 568) succinctly put it in a review of Kintsch's work, the model depicts readers "first constructing approximate mental representations, then integrating those mental representations into a coherent whole." For L2 readers, this process is complicated by limited lexical access, unfamiliar genre conventions, and cultural distance, all of which increase the processing cost of building and testing inferences while moving through a text.

Two further realities are pivotal. First, lexical coverage exerts a strong influence on comprehension; when too many tokens are unknown, readers cannot easily test or revise inferences. Studies suggest that reliable comprehension becomes likely as coverage approaches the high nineties and fragile below the mid-nineties, a finding that foregrounds systematic vocabulary development alongside reading for meaning (Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000). Second, reading is always mediated by genre and culture. What counts as evidence, how certainty is signalled, and which rhetorical moves a reader should anticipate vary across communities and text types. Inferential reading, therefore, is also intercultural reading.

The question for pedagogy is simple to state and difficult to enact: how can we cultivate L2 readers who are both linguistically capable and intellectually discerning? I propose that the answer lies in reframing reading lessons as thinking lessons. Instruction must protect processing capacity for integration, make inferential moves visible, and cultivate dispositions of curiosity and fair-minded scepticism. This requires a synthesis of extensive reading to build fluency, intensive reading to model and practice strategic reasoning, and dialogic routines that distribute the work of interpretation across a community of learners. The following sections develop this argument in a continuous narrative, avoiding the scaffolding of sub-subsections in order to model the integrated character of expert reading itself.

A Theoretical Rationale for Inferential Reading in the L2

A coherent approach to L2 reading must reconcile three perspectives: the cognitive architecture of comprehension, the discourse and pragmatic signals that structure texts, and the social practices through which reading becomes a tool for inquiry. The cognitive perspective begins with the recognition that efficient lower-level processes, orthographic, phonological, semantic, and syntactic, must operate rapidly and in coordination to free attention for higher-level integration (Grabe & Yamashita, 2022). When lexical access is laboured, syntactic parsing uncertain, or discourse markers unrecognized, the reader's ability to sustain a coherent situation model is compromised. This is not a call to "teach the code" in isolation; it is a reminder that robust inferential work presupposes sufficient fluency with the code to keep up with the text's unfolding logic.

Inference is the mechanism by which readers knit local propositions into global coherence. Even the simplest narrative requires bridging inferences to connect events and resolve reference. Expository and argumentative texts demand still more: readers must infer rhetorical moves, for example concession followed by refutation, detect stance through hedges and boosters, and evaluate the adequacy of evidence for a claim. Texts do not offer these relationships transparently; they hint, cue, and constrain. Cohesive devices, pronouns, lexical chains, ellipsis, signal continuities across sentences, while discourse markers, however, therefore, although, announce shifts in reasoning. Skilled readers marshal these clues alongside background knowledge to propose, test, and revise interpretations as they go, a practice that mirrors the construction and integration cycle.

Vocabulary knowledge participates in inference in two ways. First, breadth and depth of vocabulary increase the odds that local propositions can be apprehended with enough confidence to support hypothesis building. Second, morphological awareness gives readers leverage when confronted with unknown items. Even partial familiarity with affixes and roots can license a tentative meaning that is then checked against context. The empirical literature on lexical coverage lends the claim practical teeth: readers who know the vast majority of tokens in a text are better positioned to verify or falsify inferences as new sentences arrive (Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000). This does not mean that unknown words are fatal to comprehension; it means that the distribution and density of unknowns shape the reader's ability to test interpretations in real time.

Because inference is also cultural, genre and pragmatics figure centrally in any theoretical account. Genres are not mere containers; they are patterned social actions with conventional moves and expectations. A research abstract compresses a familiar sequence, gap, method, result, limitation, so an omitted limitation invites a critical question. A news feature's concession followed by a pivot signals the author's stance before the thesis is stated explicitly. Politeness strategies, evidential markers, and degrees of certainty socialize readers into a community's norms of argument. Teaching these cues as meaning-bearing signals, rather than as decorative add-ons, strengthens the bridge from form to interpretation. As Lăpădat and Lăpădat argue, "the connection between language structures and vectors of political ideology derives from the perception of language as a platform for communication and achievement of functional campaign objectives" (2022, p. 147). Grabe and Stoller (2013) argue that effective L2 reading instruction draws students' attention to text structure in ways that make "what good readers do" visible and transferable, an emphasis that aligns with the model advanced here.

Reading, finally, is a site of critical inquiry. The goal is not reflexive scepticism but fair-minded evaluation of claims and evidence. As Duke and Pearson (2002) observe,

strategy instruction is most powerful when it prompts readers to ask why an author framed an issue in a particular way and what evidence was offered or omitted. A reader who is sensitive to stance, who can tell when certainty is hedged, when authority is invoked, when counterevidence is acknowledged, possesses not only linguistic competence but also the beginnings of a civic habit of mind. This is a decisive reason to make inferential and critical work central rather than peripheral in the L2 curriculum.

A Pedagogical Approach: From Extensive Exposure to Transparent Strategy Work

If comprehension is constructed, pedagogy must make construction visible without reducing reading to a checklist of tricks. The approach advocated here interweaves extensive reading for volume and fluency, intensive reading for modelling and guided practice, and dialogic routines that distribute metacognitive control across learners. Each strand is necessary but not sufficient on its own, and together they create conditions under which inferential and critical reading can flourish. o translate that challenge into classroom practice, Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2020) caution that "the information we deliver as teachers of a foreign language cannot and must not be restricted to traditional structures of grammar, vocabulary and so on". (p.139)

Extensive reading is the engine of growth. In such programs learners read large amounts of level-appropriate texts for pleasure and general information, choosing titles that interest them and moving quickly enough to sustain narrative and expository flow. The cumulative effect is an expansion of lexical coverage, greater familiarity with discourse patterns, and a steady accumulation of experiences in which inference succeeds. Renandya (2007) puts the case memorably, arguing that the collective evidence for extensive reading is so strong that it would be difficult to justify its absence from a language program. This does not make extensive reading a panacea. Programs thrive when choice is genuine rather than nominal, when accountability is light-touch, for example brief reflections, book chats, reading journals, and when teachers periodically surface insights from students' reading, such as a connective that flipped an interpretation or an instance of hedging that altered a claim, so that implicit learning becomes explicit and transferrable.

Intensive reading complements extensive reading by slowing the process down and making invisible moves public. The goal is not exhaustive analysis of every sentence but judicious modelling of strategic reasoning at moments where readers are most likely to stumble. A brief think-aloud might show how a concessive "however" requires revising a running hypothesis; a guided discussion might trace reference chains across a paragraph to resolve ambiguity; a closing debrief might ask which textual clue actually tipped an inference from plausible to persuasive. Duke and Pearson's (2002) synthesis remains a touchstone here: strategy instruction is most effective when strategies are taught explicitly, modelled in context, and then practiced in purposeful reading. They also warn against ritualization, reminding teachers that it is neither possible nor desirable to demand overt application of every strategy on every text. Selectivity and authenticity are the watchwords.

Dialogic routines distribute the work of inference and build metacognitive control. Reciprocal teaching is exemplary in this respect. In Palincsar and Brown's (1984) formulation, the classroom conversation is organized around "summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting," with roles rotating to ensure participation. For L2 learners, these roles scaffold essential habits: monitoring comprehension breakdowns, warranting

claims with textual evidence, calibrating confidence, and revising interpretations in light of peers' readings. Dialogue also supports equity; the interpretive work is not monopolized by the most fluent reader, rather, it is shared, rehearsed, and increasingly internalized by all.

Vocabulary instruction is the bridge between exposure and strategy. Rather than isolating word lists from reading, a principled vocabulary strand targets high-utility academic word families and word-part knowledge that can unlock morphologically transparent items. In practice, this means teaching learners to propose a tentative meaning for an unfamiliar word from its parts, then to test that proposal against local context and the larger developing model of the text. Hsueh-Chao and Nation's (2000) findings on lexical coverage give urgency to this work; readers need enough tokens to be familiar that they can verify and refine inferences as they proceed, not merely guess and hope.

Reading to write creates accountability for inference. When learners must synthesize across texts to write a short critique, a policy memo, or a grounded comparison of viewpoints, they are obliged to turn their inferences into articulated claims supported by evidence and warrants. This is not simply an assessment device; it is how reading functions in the world. Academic and professional communities read in order to act, to decide, advise, design, or judge. Bringing those purposes into the classroom tightens the connection between inferential reading and the broader communicative competence we aim to cultivate.

Finally, instruction should acknowledge that much contemporary reading is multimodal and networked. Learners encounter arguments braided with charts, hyperlinks, and comment threads. They must learn to distinguish assertion from evidence in a graphic, to track author identity across linked pages, and to triangulate claims by consulting multiple sources. Grabe and Stoller (2013) urge teachers to connect strategy instruction to authentic genres; a short opinion piece paired with a data visualization can become a laboratory for testing interpretations and evaluating the warrants that underwrite them. These practices extend inferential reading into the practices of digital citizenship without sacrificing the language focus appropriate to an L2 course.

Implementation and Assessment in Practice

Translating principles into daily practice demands restraint as much as ambition. A flexible lesson cycle can provide structure without forcing teachers or students into a rigid sequence. One productive pattern begins before reading, when the teacher primes the situation model with a brief prompt, a relevant image, an anecdote, a sharp question, that activates background knowledge and invites initial hypotheses. In a unit on consumer contracts, for example, a dense limitation of liability clause can seed predictions about an upcoming feature article's stance. The key is to treat predictions as provisional commitments; learners return to them, testing and revising in light of textual evidence.

A first read should aim for orientation rather than detail. Learners read the text without stopping to look up everything that is unfamiliar, then write a one-sentence gist that captures what the text is trying to do. When students disagree about the gist or about where the author's central problem or question surfaces, the ensuing discussion shifts naturally to evidence. In this way, the class moves from impression to argument, with the text as arbiter. The shift prepares readers for closer work on coherence without devolving into sentence-by-sentence commentary.

The heart of the lesson is the guided reconstruction of coherence. The teacher selects moments in the text where meaning pivots, around a contrastive connective, an

unresolved pronoun, a leap from data to claim, and models how to trace the logic with just enough detail to make the inferential move visible. Students adopt a light annotation code that marks tentative inferences, uncertainties, and pivotal claims, not to produce a baroque marginalia but to externalize thinking briefly and then return to the flow of reading. Small-group discussion follows, with learners comparing interpretations, justifying them with textual clues, and refining them in light of peers' reasons. The meta-message is that expert readers keep multiple constraints in play and treat interpretations as revisable in the face of better evidence.

Critical evaluation enters as an extension of coherence work rather than a separate unit. Learners examine hedges and boosters, for example may, likely, certainly, to gauge the author's degree of commitment, attend to attributions, according to…, to assess the status of claims, and classify evidence types, anecdote, expert testimony, data, to judge sufficiency. A focused mini-lesson supplies the language needed to talk about stance, reporting verbs such as argues, concedes, cautions, evaluative adjectives such as plausible or tenuous, and modal verbs. The tone remains fair-minded. Students are encouraged to "steelman" a position before articulating a reasoned counter-reading. This combination of empathy and rigor tempers cynicism with intellectual humility.

Synthesis in writing provides closure and accountability. Short written tasks, a 150-word critique, a comparison of two sources, a micro-memo advising a hypothetical client, require learners to cite textual clues explicitly and to write their warrants, because…, into the line of argument. Over time, a brief reflective component, such as an inference journal entry, records where understanding changed and which cues mattered most. These reflections are not confessions of error but records of growth; evidence that readers are learning to monitor, test, and revise their thinking.

Assessment should reward the quality of reasoning as well as the accuracy of conclusions. Scenario-based tasks are well suited to this purpose, choosing between policy options, evaluating the fairness of contractual clauses, or recommending a course of action on the basis of two or three short texts. Transparent rubrics focus on three questions: Did the learner cite precise textual cues? Did they articulate plausible links to background knowledge? Did they test their interpretation against multiple parts of the text? Brief conferences and think-aloud checkpoints deliver feedback on moves rather than merely on answers, for instance "You noticed the concessive pivot but did not update your hypothesis; how would the argument look if you did?" In this way, assessment becomes a site for teaching thinking, not just measuring it.

Material selection and sequencing also matter. Teachers should balance challenge and accessibility; choose texts with enough novelty to force inference but enough familiarity to sustain success. Where lexical coverage is low, provide glosses, front-load background knowledge with a one-page schema sheet, or guide the reading more closely. Genres with clear move structures, news features, research abstracts, opinion pieces, are especially helpful for teaching anticipation and inference. Above all, select topics that matter to learners, so that critical questions feel urgent rather than perfunctory.

Because programs are constrained by time and examinations, a practical note on alignment is in order. When high-stakes assessments emphasize literal recall, teachers can still integrate inferential routines by framing them as tools for accuracy: noticing a concession may help eliminate distractor options, identifying hedges may prevent overinterpretation of a claim. The long-term aim, however, is to nudge assessment toward tasks that value reasoning, short syntheses, evidence checks, and argument maps

calibrated to proficiency level. Departmental moderation using shared exemplars can build consensus about what counts as good inferential reading and how it is expressed in an L2.

Finally, implementation is sustainable when teachers possess a shared metalanguage for talking about texts and a repertoire of micro-routines they can drop into any lesson. Professional learning communities can dedicate time to designing ten-minute mini-lessons on discourse markers, reference chains, or hedge recognition; to calibrating expectations with annotated student work; and to expanding genre knowledge so that teachers can make the hidden curriculum of textual moves explicit. In this respect, the goal is not to produce a single perfect unit on inference but to normalize small, repeated invitations to read between the lines across the curriculum.

Conclusion

To teach students to read between the lines is to initiate them into a language for thought. It is to show that comprehension is built, not found; that inferences can be made explicit and tested; that stance can be recognized, evaluated, and adopted with care; and that the cultural codes of genre and pragmatics are part of meaning, not mere decoration. The approach developed here, anchored in the construction and integration tradition, informed by L2 reading research, and enacted through an interwoven set of classroom practices, aims to make these truths visible and practicable without fracturing instruction into a taxonomy of subskills.

The case for explicit strategy instruction is strong when strategies are taught selectively, modeled well, and embedded in real reading (Duke & Pearson, 2002). The case for dialogic routines such as reciprocal teaching is strong when roles scaffold metacognitive control and distribute interpretive labor (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The case for volume through extensive reading is strong when learners read willingly at a level that sustains flow (Renandya, 2007). None of these strands alone suffices. Together, however, they can transform L2 reading from an exercise in extraction to a practice of inquiry, one that cultivates both proficiency and discernment. If we succeed, our students will not only read more in their additional language; they will think better with it and be better prepared to act in the world where texts are noisy, incomplete, and consequential.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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