

Thinking Matters: Inferencing in ESL Reading Lessons

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This article discusses the significance of inferencing in reading comprehension and addresses theoretical and practical issues related to teaching inferencing in English classrooms. The author explains the nature of inferencing in reading and, drawing on previous research findings and his own reflections on teaching reading to English as a second language (ESL) students, proposes a framework in which inferencing is taught via an explicit instruction approach. A sample lesson is included. Although the focus is on inferencing in an ESL context, the discussion has implications for the general English learning domain.

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One important thing about reading comprehension that I noticed from my primary (elementary) English as a second language (ESL) classes over the years is that teachers seldom make inferencing an explicit learning objective when they teach reading. Gradually, students tend to look for sentences from the given passages to fill in the lines for comprehension questions without adequate comprehension, and reading lessons become question-and-answer sessions. Allington (2002) uses the term *assign-and-assess* to describe the dominant model that governs such a mode of teaching in a reading session, which is often not effective or desirable. Duffy, Roehler, and Mason (1984) have attributed this non-skill-focused reading experience in lessons to having a curriculum that does not specify things associated with successful reading comprehension or how those things work together systemically. I can see that the lack of systematic reading strategy training for second language (L2) learners is prevalent where I teach, and there is thus a strong need for students' reading

approach to be redirected. Making *thinking* an item to teach in reading comprehension could be a good point of departure.

In English language teaching, reading instruction research has gained deserved attention since the 1980s, shedding light on the concept of training in textual inferencing, that is, the ability to draw inferences during and after reading. There is a growing understanding that inferencing is positively and significantly related to reading competence (see Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; McIntosh, 1985; Winne, Graham, & Prock, 1993). The teaching of inferencing in English as a first language (L1) has been providing success in enhancing reading comprehension from secondary levels onward (see Kispal, 2008, for a summary of recent findings). In the past decade, it has not been uncommon to see published materials on reading instruction that give teaching inferencing a role in lesson designs (e.g., Hudson, 2007). Nonetheless, rarely do we get to see academic records and scholarly reflections of how inferencing training can be done in actual practice, especially in L2 classrooms. In my own ESL teaching context, there is a need for developing strategy training for enhancing reading comprehension.

In this regard, this article discusses the significance of inferencing in English reading lessons. I start by briefly defining inferencing and its taxonomy, followed by a discussion of why inferencing matters to reading comprehension from both applied linguistics and psychological perspectives. Then, I offer suggestions on how a reading lesson with inferencing as a learning outcome can be implemented and explicitly delivered to foster reading enhancement and higher order thinking among English language learners. For this purpose, a sample reading lesson with Primary Six (Sixth-Grade) ESL students is shared and discussed.

WHAT IS INFERENCING

Definition

In reading comprehension, inferencing, or the ability to draw inferences, is the ability to use two or more pieces of textual information to arrive at an implicit third (Kispal, 2008). For instance, an inference from the two sentences *John showed Mum his*

school report. He was not allowed to play video games anymore could be that John did not do well in school and Mum punished him.

However, it does not merely mean reading between lines. Making inferences from texts implies the ability to not only decode the hidden meanings of texts, but also to use world or background knowledge appropriately and to draw conclusions about them. This is an activity that is most likely involved in comprehension when readers are required to get from the text more than its literal meaning. This view is shared by researchers. For instance, Samuels and Kamil (1984) assert that “even the simplest type of literal comprehension requires that we engage in inferencing” (p. 207). Winne et al. (1993) also affirm that inferencing is an essential element in reading comprehension in that such an engagement must be present whenever literal comprehension takes place. Moreover, Van den Broek (1990) explains why drawing inferences is essentially part of textual comprehension:

A central component of successful reading is the construction of a functional, coherent representation of the text in memory. . . . The construction of a representation may be viewed as a problem-solving process in which the reader *infers* relationships among ideas, events, and states that are described in the text. (p. 423, emphasis added)

Fundamentally, drawing inferences from a text is a reading strategy that requires readers to make a connection to one’s experience and world knowledge to make sense of the implicit message from texts. Some inferences are not easy to make from certain texts, and that is why the strategy is sometimes regarded as an advanced one.

Categorizations of Inferencing

Different linguists over the decades seem to have had their own ways of categorizing inferences. Here I shall try to synthesize some of the most frequently cited categories.

Singer (1994) has proposed three types of inferences as the most important types for reading: *elaborative inferences*, which are elaborative propositions not required for the facilitation of comprehension; *bridging inferences*, which are necessary understandings for comprehension and textual coherence for

readers; and *causal bridging inferences*, which are discourse causal relations detectable from texts. I refer to these inference types as *logical inferences* because they centre on the logical relationship among propositions in texts (see Table 1 for details).

Trabasso and Magliano (1996) have suggested another way of categorizing inference types. In their study, which focused on readers’ conscious understanding during comprehension, they suggest three categories: *explanations*, *predictions*, and *associations*. Explanations are reasons for things to occur based on relevant world knowledge and/or text information; predictions occur when readers infer consequences that are yet to happen; associations, which are generally based on world knowledge, serve to fill in the

TABLE 1. Logical and Functional Inferences

Inference types	Details	Sample inferences*
Logical inferences		
Bridging	Forms connections in texts to attain coherence	<i>He refers to John.</i>
Causal bridging	Forms connections in texts by means of cause-and-effect reasoning	John was forbidden to play video games <i>because</i> he showed Mum his school report and she was not happy with it.
Elaborative	Gap-filling; supplies extra information to the text to enrich mental representation of it	Mum read John’s school report and she felt disappointed and she scolded John for his poor results.
Functional inferences		
Explanations	Explains why things occur	The school report was so poor that Mum was angry. So she punished John.
Predictions	Predicts what is to come	John will remember this and will be good.
Associations	Associates the textual meaning with world knowledge and supplies relevant information	Mum shouted at John and took away his games.

*The sample inferences are drawn from the passage *John showed Mum his school report. He was not allowed to play video games anymore.*

details of whatever is happening in the context of a text. I refer to these three types of inferences as *functional inferences* because they are produced as readers try to *do something* while reading the text; readers explain, predict, and/or associate an idea with other ideas while reading.

These functional inferences are defined by the intention of reading; for instance, if one reads to confirm what he or she sees will come next in the text, he or she naturally makes predictions from it. These inferences are in theory different from the logical ones, which are defined based on the linguistic and logical features of texts. However, we should notice that the difference in these classifications could be a matter of perspective. Some inference types do overlap one another in terms of meaning in certain contexts; for instance, very often one must bridge information in order to explain matters from the text, and thus, bridging and explanation inferences are not mutually exclusive. Although teachers should be aware of the categories of inferences, they should note that the extent to which the inference types are taught separately may depend on the cognitive maturity of the students.

Table 1 summarizes the categories discussed so far with sample inferences. The categorization is not meant to be exhaustive; no categorization of inference types can be. But the identifications previously listed may be helpful when it comes to teaching and learning inferencing.

WHY INFERENCING MATTERS TO READING

Applied Linguistics Perspective

The componential models of reading (Urquhart & Weir, 1998) have informed us of the key elements in reading comprehension. This trend of reading models, as Urquhart and Weir (1998) explain, describes the essential components of successful reading comprehension in general, as opposed to the process models of reading, which put emphasis on the real-time procedural mental mechanism while reading. Although the componential models of reading do not usually contain inferencing as a distinctive item, there are powerful hints suggesting its significance.

Bernhardt's (1991) three-component model of reading describes the process of L2 reading as consisting of *language, literacy, and world knowledge*. Word recognition is included in language, which involves all the visible elements of texts, such as word structures and syntax. Literacy refers to the strategic side of reading comprehension, which is the ability to choose the most appropriate approach to tackle a text and to know why such an approach should work best. World knowledge means background knowledge, which is an essential element in a componential model of reading for its linkage with the *schema theory*. Briefly, schema "describes what a learner knows about a topic, a text, and its functions" (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009, p. 26). The schema theory holds that we understand a message as we externally build expectations and assumptions that impose external constraints in the process of understanding (Schiffrin, 1994). Similarly, Rumelhart (1980) points out that "the process of understanding discourse is the process of finding a configuration of schemata that offers an adequate account of the passage in question" (p. 47). Moreover, research done in the last two decades on factors influencing literacy development of second language speakers points out clearly that background knowledge is significant to the success of L2 reading comprehension (see, e.g., Lesaux, Koda, Siegel, & Shanahan, 2006, for a thorough review). These tell how essential world/background knowledge is to reading.

Both literacy and world knowledge in Bernhardt's (1991) model are directly associated with inferencing, because it is a reading strategy and it involves drawing on world knowledge by definition. Therefore, logically put, inferencing has to be a key component in reading.

Pressley's (2001) framework on improving reading comprehension through research-validated instruction also puts stress on strategy instruction and background knowledge training. One of the five elements he incorporates into his framework is "encouraging students to build world knowledge through reading and to relate what they know to what they read" (n.p.). Pressley suggests that readers be trained to make sense of texts by consciously associating them with what they know or have already learned. This naturally makes a strong case for teaching

inferencing in reading lessons. Cain, Oakhill, Barnes, and Bryant (2001) add that, “to make an inference, information from the text and a taught knowledge base had to be recalled and integrated” (p. 856). In essence, inferencing connects textual information and world knowledge, which builds the fundamentals of reading comprehension.

Psychological Perspective

The learning of inferencing is by definition the learning of reasoning skills, which are thinking skills. Learning to be aware of one’s thinking process is literally “thinking about thinking.” In psychology, thinking about thinking, or *metacognition*, seems to have a great impact on reading comprehension. As Brown (1980) puts it, metacognition is “the deliberate conscious control of one’s own cognitive actions” (p. 453). It is believed that by having the reader know the thinking process during reading, he or she would be more likely to be able to comprehend the text.

The positive association between metacognition and acquisition of reading skills has been supported by a number of researchers. For instance, Paris and Jacobs’s (1984) research with third graders shows significant links between awareness of reading strategies and reading comprehension performance. Their research findings imply that the teaching of reading strategies helps language learners.

In the context of ESL, Carrell, Pharis, and Liberto’s (1989) experimental study with university-level participants also found evidence for the positive impact of metacognitive strategy training in ESL reading. It is suggested that ESL learners should benefit from explicit, comprehension-fostering metacognitive strategy training.

Moreover, Pressley, Symons, McGoldrick, and Snyder (1995) observe that very often students are indeed capable of producing the reading strategies they are trained in but fail to apply them unless instructions are given. Their findings imply that strategy instruction could help to improve reading performance, particularly for less competent readers.

These studies of thinking and strategy training in reading direct us to the notions that instructing learners in metacognitive

strategies has sound theoretical support and that students benefit from being aware of the meaning-making process as they read. As Grabe (2009) has stated, heightened metacognition in language learners allows them to make use of different reading skills to enhance comprehension. In this regard, the teaching and learning of inferencing, which is a set of thinking skills, are indeed appropriate and productive to reading lessons.

The Case for L2 Learners

Although there is theoretical support for the significance of inferencing in reading comprehension and reading lessons, things become complicated when it comes to second language learning. There has been a debate concerning what influences the employment of L2 reading strategies (Hudson, 2007). One line of research holds that L2 proficiency determines the ability of applying reading strategies in L2, whereas the other side asserts that advanced L1 reading strategies can be transferred to L2. As a teacher of ESL learners, I believe that there is truth in both sides, but I tend to believe that students cannot simply transfer their L1 reading strategies to L2. As far as reading strategy is concerned, students have a great deal to learn in L2 reading lessons before they can fluently apply the appropriate reading strategies.

Kern (1989) has pointed out the advantages of explicitly training children in the use of comprehension strategies. What he suggests applies to both L1 and L2 students:

By providing L2 readers with a set of specific strategies designed to assist them in: 1) inferring the meaning of unknown words; and 2) synthesizing meaning in larger segments of texts, lower level processing skills might be automatized to a greater degree and cognitive resources used more efficiently. (p. 136)

His study with ESL students concludes that explicit reading strategy training has a strong positive effect on L2 readers' comprehension learning, particularly for struggling readers. I would therefore argue that, with good lesson planning and execution, inferencing can be an excellent subject to teach for L2 students and there is a strong case for teaching inferencing in ESL classrooms.

TEACHING OF INFERENCING

Teaching inferencing in reading does not seem to be particularly new in the West, be it in the education domain of L1 (see Pearson, 1984) or L2 (see Nuttall, 1996). Some published teaching materials for children even aim specifically at training inference drawing (e.g., Nickelsen & Glasscock, 2004). In academic research, however, studies on teaching inferences in classroom contexts, especially in L2, are far from abundant. Kispal (2008) analysed research conducted during the 1980s. However, those few studies involved only native speakers of the target language, and they were mainly experimental, and thus did not record the actual teaching and learning processes in an authentic classroom environment.

In the following, I suggest that we can contribute to the exploration of the teaching of inferencing with an explicit approach. Although I use it for the ESL students I teach, the approach is appropriate for English language learners in general.

Explicit Instruction

Basically, the explicit instruction approach to reading instruction is a form of the direct instruction approach, or an advancement of it. Direct instruction in teaching reading strategies, as noted by Winograd and Hare (1988), is essentially an approach through which teachers would explain to students “what the strategy is,” “why the strategy should be learned,” “how to use the strategy,” “when and where the strategy is to [be] used,” and “how to evaluate [the] use of the strategy” (pp. 123–124). That is, the teacher is to explain clearly the target of each lesson with direct instruction and ensure that learners are aware of what they are expected to learn and why they are taught the subject concerned.

The understanding and operational procedures of explicit teaching of reading may vary across different executors in different teaching contexts. But in general, the approach is about equipping and empowering students to engage in the process of reading on their own (Almasi, 2003) and getting readers to be aware of the thinking process in reading (Wilkinson, 1999).

Goeke (2009) provides a precise and appropriate operational definition of explicit instruction. Goeke makes a clear distinction

between direct instruction and explicit instruction in the general sense that direct instruction has a focus on affecting behaviour via material presentation, whereas explicit instruction focuses on *how* learners learn. Both of the approaches involve teaching that is clear, concrete, structured, explicit, and demonstrative. Learners get to know about what they are learning and how to use the knowledge being taught. However, in explicit instruction, learners tend to be considered more as constructors of knowledge. Teachers using explicit instruction focus more on students' learning and attention. To acknowledge that our teaching is not merely teacher-fronted but takes serious consideration of students' learning process, I borrow this concept from Goeke and propose the use of the explicit instruction approach for reading instruction, which involves the sense of learner-centredness.

Goeke's (2009) framework of explicit instruction covers the learning of not only literacy, but other school curriculums as well. Table 2 displays some of the selected features of the explicit instruction which are deemed the most relevant in teaching reading.

A Framework of Teachers' and Learners' Engagement

Wilkinson (1999) holds that "one of the goals of explicit teaching is the development of metacognition—the ability to think and talk about learning or the ability to deal with learning in an abstract way" (p. 7). We have known that the learning of inferencing is to learn to think, and thus it becomes a natural choice that we adopt the explicit instruction approach for teaching inferencing. However, there needs to be a framework for teachers to follow.

With reference to Goeke's (2009) framework, and drawing on my personal reflections of my recent ESL lessons in which I tried to teach inferencing explicitly at the upper elementary level, I propose a framework which may help improve students' textual inferencing, getting them to be more aware of the reading process and how reading should be done in order to become more fluent readers.

The five guidelines I present here are not in any hierarchical order, and any of these points may be more significant than the

TABLE 2. Selected Features of Goeke’s (2009, pp. 10–11) Explicit Instruction

Features	Details
Clear objectives	The teacher is perfectly aware of what he or she wants students to learn by the end of the lesson, and students are made aware of that, too. This is important because unclear objectives often lead to vague teaching and learning.
Focused on meaningful task	The teacher directs his or her and the students’ attention on the task at hand, which is always purposefully and meaningfully designed accordingly to learners’ needs. Learning can be maximized when teachers and students know where to place their attention during the lessons.
Efficient modelling and explanation	The teacher explains what is to be learned and models how it can be done. The knowledge for learning is often made explicit, and students are to experience how independent learners learn.
Following a structured framework	Teaching is to follow a framework that aims at maximizing achievements for the majority of learners.
Not drilling, rote, or teacher directed	The lessons are always a mutual engagement of the teachers and learners. Learners can direct and monitor their own learning.

others depending on individual classroom circumstances. The suggestions, therefore, should be seen as a framework which can initiate more attempts and discussions, leading to a more systematic way to teach reading in a wider context.

Make inferencing explicit to students via think-alouds. As we are teaching inferencing, we should make it clear that students know that they are learning inferencing as a reading strategy. To suit students’ levels, teachers may adjust their language for explaining what drawing inferences means. Demonstrating think-alouds in class would be an effective and attractive approach. Think-aloud is to verbally report whatever is in one’s head while doing a task (see, e.g., Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995); in this case, the task is reading. Through a teacher’s demonstration of think-aloud while reading, students get to learn how a skilled reader makes meanings from texts. Teachers’ modelling of a

strategy is the first step of passing strategic expertise to learners, directing them to the independent use of the reading strategy, and to become engaged and reflective readers (Wilhelm, 2001).

Alternatively, students could be instructed to write their comments on the text in the margins while reading to practise thinking while reading. Teachers may then make use of students' written responses to understand their strengths and weaknesses in comprehension, which would be useful data for designing subsequent reading lessons (see Oster, 2001).

Teachers may try teaching inferencing in its different categories. To this end, the line of functional inferences may be helpful. Students could be shown how they can explain, predict, and associate with the given texts. In practice I would include summarizing as well. Also try various text types and see how students respond. Plenty of guided practice is advised.

Provide a clear lesson outline for students. Teachers are advised to know very well the flow and goals of the lesson. And learners are to be told at the start how the lesson is to be organized and what they are expected to gain by the end of it. But certainly, this does not imply the following of a rigid plan without flexibility. The essence is that there is a plan and students are aware of it. Once the lesson has begun, teachers should endeavour to provide students with the lesson "map" to follow while being ready to make adjustments according to the circumstances. The following are suggestions on introducing a reading lesson to learners.

To start, the teacher may introduce the content of the lesson, that is, a particular reading skill students are expected to learn and/or practise. It is particularly important that a clear goal be established for setting up the lesson atmosphere and getting students ready to learn. The teacher may instruct students in the use of the skill and inform them in detail how it works. A teacher's enthusiastic demonstration could be very useful for a start to attract attention and build up a framework for the lesson.

Regarding lesson staging, some teachers may like to have a section on group work at some point in the lesson. However, such organization may not be necessary for a reading session under an

explicit teaching approach because the lesson focus would be the learning of the reading skill, not the spoken language for interaction and negotiation. Getting pupils' attention and ensuring that they are on task for the learning of the reading skills would be the key. It should always be noted that reticent learners and pupils without sufficient target language competence may not be able to benefit in a group interaction environment, unless the target language is their L1 or in an L2 lesson where students are allowed to discuss in L1, but that may to some extent defeat the purpose of the lesson.

Fuel the lessons by learners' responses. The handling of learners' responses plays a vital role in this framework. Learners' responses refer to written classwork, homework, formal and informal verbal responses, and other reactions to the teaching content. The teacher needs to make use of these responses in three main ways: bringing the lesson forward, conveying key messages, and modifying subsequent lessons.

Teachers should maximize pupils' participation by eliciting from them their feedback and suggestions. In inferencing learning, it is particularly important that students can listen to what others can infer from the given texts to stimulate thinking. Again, the promotion of think-alouds would allow learners to hear how their peers make meanings from texts so that they may be able to learn and adopt the strategies as their own (Wilhelm, 2001). In the case of having to literally comment on the texts, students should also get to see how others react literally to them. In this way, students would be aware of what can be achieved during and after reading.

As to the significance of a skill, teachers may first elicit from pupils what they think about it instead of directly telling them the importance of anything. Teachers are advised to always see pupils' responses as a useful resource. Their feedback should communicate their thinking pattern in the learning process, which can give teachers valuable information for shaping their teaching in future lessons.

Decide on the choice of texts to teach inferencing. Any texts with implicit information and messages may be used for inferencing training. The use of authentic materials is certainly

encouraged. In fact, very often any reading materials students usually work on can be used for inferencing learning because drawing inferences is essential in reading comprehension. A series of worksheets can also be designed to progressively train pupils to draw inferences. The chosen texts must be modified to suit the level of the participants because scaffolding for learners is important. The more advanced the pupils are, the more complicated the text should get. Regarding the choice of designed materials, teachers may, for instance, refer to Wright (2003) for a selection of meaningful short stories for teaching inferencing at a variety of levels, and Applegate, Quinn, and Applegate (2008) for a spectrum of narrative and informational texts designed for accessing English language learners' reading abilities, including inference skills. For authentic pieces, of course, any articles from any magazines that teachers deem appropriate could be helpful.

There need not be a separate assessment on inferencing because it is part of reading. Observing pupils' responses in class, worksheets, and holistic assessment could be sufficiently informative regarding the students' inferencing behaviour and competence.

Make inferencing a part of the curriculum. I suggest that the teaching of inferencing does not form an isolated syllabus from the original one in any given teaching context. Although it could be useful to develop class-based and/or school-based materials for reading strategies training to suit the needs of participants, the use of authentic materials, course books, and story books for inferencing training should also be present. This gives participants the sense that the skills learned are not to be used separately from other learning in the language programme they are taking; instead, any reading strategy learned is for turning them into better readers, and thus it is to be used whenever one reads.

Language curriculum developers should try to incorporate inferencing training into the curriculum as part of an integrated programme to maximize the impact of inferencing learning. But importantly, as Keene and Zimmermann (2007) have pointed out, comprehension strategy instruction should not rob students of their read-aloud experience for the joy of reading. There needs to

be a balance in the components of a reading programme to help learners become both effective and active readers, not simply test takers.

These guidelines succinctly sum up what I believe is useful for reading teachers, based on literature and my professional experience. However, one should bear in mind that there is not anything called an “explicit teaching plan for inferencing.” Teachers’ attitudes will determine the explicitness of the lesson and the effectiveness of the delivery. The proposed framework demands engagement from both the teacher and the pupils. And the teacher, being a leader in the process, should never be anything less than flexible, reactive, and reflective to make each of the lessons valuable to both parties.

Into the Classroom

This section presents a sample lesson I have conducted which was an attempt to actualize the 5-point framework elaborated in the last section. In this illustration, you will see that I demonstrated think-aloud to students in order to teach them thinking while reading; I made the lesson contents explicit to the learners; I elicited responses from students and took their responses seriously because students’ reactions formed a key part of the lesson; the material chosen was appropriate to students’ level, and it was sufficiently complex to provoke thinking; the lesson, which was the start of a series of reading training sessions, could be viewed as a useful introduction of the concept of inferencing to students. Hopefully, the success of this skill-training trend of English reading education can lead to language curriculum development in my school and more opportunities can be provided to learners to widely apply the skills they learn to their many other reading experiences in the future.

In a reading session with a class of 34 Hong Kong Primary Six ESL students, who were approximately 11 years old, the following steps were used to engage the students in the thinking process in reading comprehension in order to foster a foundation on which to make better inferences. This could be seen as one of the many possible ways to begin placing inferencing into one’s English language curriculum.

Lesson goals.

- to make students aware of the importance of thinking while reading
- to make students aware that a lot of messages in texts are not explicit
- to let students see how thinking is done while reading
- to let students experience how useful inferencing can be
- to see students' responses to the thinking-oriented way of reading
- to provide the teacher with information on how future inferencing lessons can be planned

Before reading. I told students that the lesson was to let them “attack” a text by drawing messages from it. I told them that they would experience how skilful readers read and how important messages from texts can be retrieved. I pointed out that it was a common mistake to just look for answers from texts in order to complete tasks. What they needed to know was that the purpose of reading is learning, not doing comprehension questions for schoolwork. I made it clear that it is important to develop highlighting and make comments while reading. It is a life skill. I set the purpose of my lesson explicitly so that students would understand the direction of the lesson and the value of their participation.

I then handed out an ordinary school-based comprehension worksheet taken from the English department's database. The text was a 250-word friendly letter. A boy was telling another boy his holiday plan in the text. The text was followed by some table-filling and true-or-false tasks.

The tasks were ignored in the session because they were only for consolidation purposes. It was the reading process in the lesson that I wanted to focus on.

I told students that the lesson would focus only on the text, not the tasks. My instruction was, “Please read the text. While you are reading, highlight the key points and write down any comments you have in the space around the letter.” This task had an important impact on the students because through this they could have a stronger interaction with the text in question, rather than merely reading for answering questions that follow. I wanted them to understand that the purpose of reading was always making meaning from the text.

While reading. While students were reading, I set up the computer and projector and projected the text on the blackboard. I did not pull down the screen because I needed to write on the blackboard while the projected passage was shown on the blackboard as well. A powerful projector would be needed here because the classroom lights would not be switched off. Students would see the teacher's handwriting together with the projected image. Alternatively, a visualizer or an electronic whiteboard could be used for showing the text with the teacher's impromptu handwriting on it.

Finishing the set-up, I walked around to see students' progress. I was expecting that most of them would not write many meaningful things without guidance. I was quite right. But the students were all focused on the text and looking for things to highlight and comment on. I decided to let them read and write individually for some time because they needed to experience the difficulty of finding things to highlight and reacting to texts through jotting notes. And it was the very difficulty they had to overcome via practice and experience.

After around 10 minutes of silent reading, most of the children seemed to have completed what they felt was the task. I stopped the activity and directed their attention to the projected text on the blackboard. I told the children: "Look at how I do it."

Think-aloud demonstration. On the blackboard with the projected passage, I underlined and circled the key words and key phrases, line by line. At that moment, I demonstrated to the class, as a skilled reader, the way to find the gist and expand one's thoughts in reaction to it.

In the text, Thomas told Simon that his family would go to the Sun Resort in Malaysia for holiday. There was a line like this:

As you know, my dad loves to play golf. Sun Resort is located right next to a golf course. Dad was already dreaming about swinging away at the ball!

I thought aloud and wrote down my comments on the board as I read on. My written commentary for this part was, "Thomas's dad could play golf there easily," and "He couldn't wait to play!"

At some point, I invited the class to respond to the line I was working on. I raised this question: "What do you know about the story now?" My demonstration purposefully increased the motivation of the class and the responses were rigorous.

Students' reaction. After a few lines of demonstration, students quickly understood the thinking style of reading I tried to show and many of them were eager to voice their thoughts. There was a line in the passage like this:

When Mum looked at the pages that showed the bedrooms and bathrooms, she was delighted.

I pointed at the phrase "at the pages" and asked the children what it referred to. Many of them could point out that it was the travel brochure, which was mentioned earlier in the text. A correct logical inference, *bridging*, was achieved here. Also, some students were able to point out what exactly the mother was looking at: She was looking at the pages about the hotel. Reaching this conclusion required readers to make use of their prior experience or world knowledge. A functional inference, *association*, was being called for.

Moreover, I was surprised at how a student responded to the following line:

I [Thomas] hope I will be able to practice my canoeing skills at Sun Resort!

A student put up his hand and immediately expressed that Thomas was not very sure if he would find a canoe there because the canoes might have been rented out when he reached there, and that was why he could only "hope" he could canoe there. I had thought only that Thomas was really into canoeing and I did not pay much attention to the use of the word *hope*. Certainly, this student's thought was based more on his imagination and his understanding of the world than from the text, but at this stage I tended not to dispute the students' relevant understandings.

As my teaching went on I would gradually lead them to justify their inferences against textual clues and help them differentiate between association and elaboration. For instance, students could be asked to choose from a list of potential inferences the

acceptable ones for a given passage and point out why they would make their choices. The ability to justify their inferencing is as important as that of producing correct and constructive inferences from texts. Thinking practice of this sort may be implemented so that students would gradually understand that textual clues instead of personal association or feeling are often more reliable in supporting an inference.

Round-up. It was merely a 35-minute lesson and the passage discussion had covered only half of the short letter by the end of the session. I stopped the discussion to leave time for a wrap-up.

I told students that what I showed them was a general way of reading which could be applied to many other texts. More important, many messages from texts are more or less hidden. So it is important to think while reading and get the important messages that the writer did not clearly or directly spell out. And I appreciated their efforts in the lesson.

I asked students to reread the rest of the text at home in just the same way as I had demonstrated.

Reflection and follow-up. This lesson was observed by a visiting expert English teacher who was also an experienced curriculum developer. He was impressed by the enthusiastic delivery, the lesson pace, and the clarity of the lesson focus. He noted that I avoided using the term *infer* for this lesson but instead I said “guessing or getting the hidden messages.” I was not trying to make the explicit implicit, but I think I did not want to scare students away with jargon when a new mode of reading might have been enough to challenge and threaten them.

It was a delight to see how the lesson unfolded and how effective a start it could be. Inferencing lessons can be done more frequently after a start like this. Students came up with interesting thoughts in a subsequent session of a similar type with different text types and less teacher guidance (see students’ sample work in the Appendix).

I understand that this lesson is just one example of teaching inferencing; however, the experience I am sharing here may stimulate a skill-oriented trend of teaching reading, as I have stimulated it in my school.

My next task is to find out more about students' inferencing behaviour and work on specific types of inferencing that they are not good at. Their responses, both verbal and literal, are crucial, especially for those who would do action research in this area.

It is beyond the scope of the present article to give a full instruction plan on developing L2 students' various inferencing skills. But for those who would like to go beyond this shared lesson, I would suggest that they make use of short passages to provoke thinking aloud, like using the sample passage in the Appendix. Depending on students' language and cognitive levels, teachers could adjust how thoroughly students should learn about the categorization of inferences. With the Primary Six ESL students in my class, one of the things I did in subsequent lessons was to comment on their verbal and written inferences explicitly. I categorized their inferences, talked about their relevance to the comprehension of the text, and elicited alternative thoughts from the class. Because different students interpreted the texts differently, the room for discussion in my lessons was large and thus I could raise the interactivity of the lessons. My students learned about inferencing types and applications, and, more important, I think they learned to be aware that they needed to draw inferences for comprehension. Both inferencing awareness and competence were important points of concern when I designed my reading lessons.

It would be enjoyable to teach inferencing, but it would be tiring every time because demonstrating the thinking process, and leading students to think in similar ways via such a demonstration, demands great effort from the teacher. It is often not how well you have planned but how well you actually execute the lesson that counts.

CONCLUSION

This article has put emphasis on the importance of inferencing to reading comprehension and the importance of teaching it. For this purpose, an explicit instruction approach is recommended. I believe that the development of this exciting area of teaching and research is significant to the teaching of reading in both L1 and L2, making the idea of explicitly teaching inferencing all the more important.

The suggested framework calls for teachers' and students' active engagement. There are no "one-size-fits-all" or "plug-and-play" plans in teaching reading, especially with the metacognitive approach which draws heavily on teachers' handling of learners' responses. As Nunan (2000) puts it,

There are aspects of all methods which might usefully be incorporated into one's classroom practice. However, individual classroom exercises and techniques need to be derived in the first instance from a consideration of the purposes to which the language will potentially be put, and the functions it will fulfil. (p. 248)

The recorded lesson in this article is only one of the many ways one can introduce a thinking-oriented reading approach. Teachers may want to start with a specific inferencing type. But no matter which direction you choose, the explicit framework would be useful because it potentially enhances the impact of a reading session and it stretches the potentials of both the teacher and the students in the reading lesson.

My hope, then, is to see this line of reading training being adopted, adapted, and developed by teachers in different contexts to suit their classes and to pursue quality teaching and learning. I hope that the development of this zone of teaching will lead to many successful examples of reading programmes and provide a platform for teachers and reading coaches at various levels to enhance teaching practices and curriculums, and to contribute to the vibrant academic discussion on reading instruction.

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APPENDIX

Libera

'Libera' is the name of a group of boy singers. The members of the team are usually around 7-16 years old. They are from different schools in South London.

These young singers sing for the church and TV shows.

The team started 20 years ago but the members change from time to time because when the boys get older, they will leave the group. New boys join in to take the place of the old ones. The better singers of the group can make CDs and travel to places to perform in concerts.

(do they earn money?)

Libera

'Libera' is the name of a group of boy singers. The members of the team are usually around 7-16 years old. They are from different schools in South London. These young singers sing for the church and TV shows.

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\$\$?

Like real singers!

are they good at singing?!

young boys (children, teenager)

how can they stand for a long time?!

automatically maybe better!

so lucky!

no girl!

maybe bigger or smaller

Libera is in London

no income? Longtime ago!

??

just them?

again distinguish