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## **Efficacy of Inquiry-Based Learning and Teaching Approach in EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension among Chinese High School Students**

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### **Abstract**

Chinese EFL high school teaching often overlooks critical inferential reasoning in reading comprehension. This study proposes a shift from teacher-centric methods to an Inquiry-Based Learning and Teaching (IBLT) framework, expected to enhance EFL inferential reading abilities among Chinese high school students. This aligns with China's National English Curriculum Standards, emphasizing the importance of such proficiency. The study gauges current EFL reading comprehension in Chinese high schools and assesses IBLT's efficacy through a controlled, nine-week experiment, with data analysis revealing a positive impact. The findings aim to inform pedagogical tactics, promoting a more interactive, student-focused teaching model.

**Keywords:** EFL; Inferential Reading Comprehension Skills; Chinese High School Students; IBLT Approach

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### **1.0 Introduction**

EFL inferential reading comprehension, a crucial aspect of English reading learning, involves interpreting implicit meanings within the context and demands active involvement and higher cognitive functioning (Lee, 2023; Kirmizi, 2010). The High School English Curriculum Standard of 2017 underscores this, encouraging the proposition of English reading instruction models rooted in discourse linguistic theory (Shi, 2021; Guan, 2022).

However, current Chinese high school teaching methodologies often feature a teacher-centric approach, prioritizing passive learning over active engagement, thereby inhibiting the development of critical EFL inferential reading comprehension skills (Chen, 2021; Wang, 2022). Such practices culminate in a superficial understanding of texts and impede the evolution of independent analytical and higher-order thinking abilities, essential for inferential comprehension (Yang, 2019; Li, 2022).

The IBLT approach offers a transformative solution (Michael et al., 2011). It endorses active engagement and cultivates a deeper understanding of subject matters, thereby promoting the development of EFL inferential reading comprehension skills (Yang & Hu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). The effectiveness of IBLT is manifest in improved reading comprehension and heightened student engagement and

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motivation (Abdullah, 2014; Adege, 2016). Consequently, IBLT capably mitigates the limitations of traditional teaching methodologies, fostering the evolution of EFL inferential reading comprehension skills (Ma, 2021; Cui, 2022).

### 1.1 Statement of Problem

Critical to the acquisition of English language skills, reading comprehension is inextricably linked to students' overarching linguistic proficiency (Xu & Jin, 2020; Wu, 2018). Precise understanding of discourse heavily relies on robust inferential reasoning, and without it, misinterpretations are likely to occur (Chen, 2022; Yang, 2019). Unfortunately, the prevailing pedagogical strategies in Chinese high schools for EFL inferential reading fall short. Predominantly, these traditional methods are teacher-centric, favoring passive learning and rote memorization, while neglecting the active involvement and critical thinking vital for successful inferential comprehension (Luo, 2021; Guo, 2021). This teaching approach inhibits the development of higher cognitive abilities among students and restricts their capacity to independently analyze, evaluate, and interpret texts (Chen & Li, 2021; Wang et al, 2023). As a result, students often struggle with comprehending implicit meanings and drawing coherent inferences from the text, substantially impairing their EFL inferential reading comprehension skills (Ma, 2021; Li, 2021). These circumstances underscore the urgent need to explore alternative, more effective pedagogical strategies that can adequately nurture reading comprehension skills (Liu, 2021; Huang, 2019).

### 1.2 Objective of the Study

This study examines the impact of the IBLT approach on Chinese high school students' EFL inferential reading comprehension skills. Employing a quantitative method, it tracks performance changes before and after IBLT implementation in EFL reading comprehension classrooms. The findings, highlighting the IBLT effectiveness, will guide future research aimed at bolstering EFL inferential reading comprehension. For this purpose, the research objectives include:

RO1: To assess the current overall proficiency level of Chinese high school students' EFL inferential reading comprehension skills.

RO2: To examine the effectiveness of the IBLT approach in enhancing students' EFL inferential reading comprehension skills among Chinese high school students.

## 2.0 Literature Review

This part critically examines the crucial role of EFL inferential reading comprehension skills in EFL reading learning and the limitations of conventional teaching methods in EFL inferential instruction. It highlights the IBLT approach as a potential solution and identifies a gap in the literature exploring this approach's impact on EFL inferential reading comprehension among Chinese high school students.

### 2.1 Reading Comprehension in EFL Learning

Understanding written text, or reading comprehension, is a crucial cornerstone in the field of EFL learning. This multifaceted skill involves more than mere word recognition and decoding; it requires the integration of various cognitive processes to construct meaning from the text (Hilsdon, 2010; Liu, 2016). EFL Reading comprehension extends to the interpretation and critical analysis of the author's intended message, thus significantly contributing to a learner's overall language competency (Kintsch, 1998). The direct relationship between proficient reading comprehension skills and enhanced EFL proficiency has been well-documented, highlighting the essential role of these skills in EFL learning (Hudson, 2007; Zhang, 2018).

### 2.2 EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension Skills

In the context of EFL reading learning, inferential reading comprehension skills take on amplified importance. These higher-level cognitive skills empower learners to make deductions and comprehend meanings that are not explicitly stated in the text, thereby enriching their understanding of the EFL language and culture (Cao & Yao, 2019; Chen, 2022). EFL inferential reading comprehension requires learners to actively forge connections, use prior knowledge, and deploy their inferential abilities to uncover underlying meanings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the text.

### 2.3 Traditional EFL Reading Teaching Methods in China and Their Limitations

The pedagogical landscape for EFL reading teaching in China has been primarily characterized by traditional, teacher-centric methods. These techniques hinge on the passive absorption of knowledge, focusing on rote memorization and drill-based exercises, which are believed to instill language basics in learners (Hong, 2019; Luo, 2020). While such methods have their merits, they fall short in nurturing critical inferential reading comprehension skills due to their lack of focus on active student engagement and critical thinking (Chen, 2021; Wang, 2020). This deficit can limit learners' ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret texts independently, creating a crucial gap in their EFL reading learning journey.

### 2.4 IBLT Approach

In contrast to traditional teacher-centric methods, the IBLT approach encourages active engagement, problem-solving, and cultivates a sense of autonomy in learners. IBLT is rooted in the philosophy that knowledge should not be passively received but actively constructed, positioning students as the central agents in the learning process (Facione, 2011; Hilsdon, 2010). IBLT cultivates an environment that stimulates curiosity, encourages inquiry, and promotes exploration, thereby fostering a deep understanding of the text and nurturing EFL critical inferential reading comprehension skills (Buranapatana, 2006; Facione, 2015).

### 2.5 IBLT in the EFL Reading Comprehension Instruction in China

The potential benefits of IBLT have sparked interest among educators and researchers in China, leading to a gradual incorporation of this approach into EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, comprehensive empirical studies examining the effectiveness of IBLT in fostering EFL inferential reading comprehension skills among Chinese high school students remain notably scarce (Qiu, 2019; Luo, 2020). Preliminary research hints at the potential benefits of IBLT approach, suggesting it could enhance reading comprehension performance and increase students' motivation and engagement in the learning process (Lee 2014; Martinee-Lee & Duncan, 2015; Liu, 2022).

### 2.6 Gap in Literature

The IBLT approach is emerging, but empirical studies on its impact on EFL inferential reading among Chinese high schoolers are lacking. Addressing this can guide EFL teaching advancements in China. This review emphasizes the need for innovative methods like IBLT, prompting this study's aim to evaluate its effectiveness.

### 3.0 Methodology

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, procedures, data collection, and analysis methods used in this study to address the research objectives.

#### 3.1 Participants

The study included a total of 98 Chinese high school students, with 49 students in the control group and 49 students in the experimental group. The participants, aged between 16 and 17, had comparable initial English proficiency levels. Ethical considerations were upheld by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

#### 3.2 Instruments

In this study, two key instruments were utilized: a standardized EFL inferential reading comprehension test and a questionnaire gauging students' self-perceptions of their respective EFL inferential reading comprehension skills. Administered pre- and post-intervention, the test assessed changes in students' EFL inferential reading skills due to the IBLT instructional method. Similarly, the questionnaire was issued at identical stages to monitor shifts in students' self-assessed EFL inferential reading comprehension skills, thereby determining the effectiveness of the IBLT approach.

#### 3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted over a nine-week period, segmented into three stages. Initially, both groups took a pretest and questionnaire to measure baseline EFL inferential reading skills. The experimental group then received IBLT instruction, while the control group continued traditional methods. Post-intervention, both groups undertook a post-test and follow-up questionnaire. The results were then comparatively analyzed to assess the intervention's impact.

#### 3.4 Data Collection

Over nine weeks, a pretest was given to control and experimental groups to measure initial EFL inferential reading proficiency. Simultaneously, students' self-perceived skills were recorded through questionnaires. The experimental group experienced IBLT-based instruction, while the control group used traditional methods. After the intervention, both groups received a posttest and a second questionnaire. This process aimed to capture changes in EFL inferential reading comprehension skills and student perceptions.

#### 3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from tests and questionnaires were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to evaluate EFL inferential reading skills changes. Questionnaire responses gauged self-perceived skill shifts. Independent t-tests compared groups, measuring IBLT's effectiveness against traditional methods among Chinese high schoolers.

### 4.0 Findings

This section presents the demographic details of the study participants. Subsequently, the results from the data analysis are detailed in line with the set of research objectives.

#### 4.1 Respondents' Demographic Profile

The demographic characteristics of the study include gender, duration of EFL learning, final EFL exam results, and distribution of English scores among students. The sample comprised of 49 students each in the experimental and control groups, amounting to a total of 98 students. Refer to Table 1 for specifics.

Table 1 Respondents' demographic profile (n=98)

	EC	CC
Total	49	49
Age	16-17	16-17
EFL Learning Experience	11	11
Average Scores	97.362	96.671

EFL Level (Scores ≥ 120)	7	8
EFL Level (90 ≤ Scores < 120)	28	28
EFL Level (Scores < 90)	14	13

Table 1 underscores the similar English proficiency levels in both the EC and CC, as evidenced by their almost identical final exam scores. The distribution of EFL scores between the classes is also comparable. This parity is further illustrated in Table 2, which shows a similar distribution of EFL examination scores in both classes.

Table 2 Independent samples t-test on final EFL scores of EC and CC

Variable Name	Variable Value	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P	Mean Difference	Cohen's d Value
English Scores	EC	49	97.362	16.249	0.689	0.493	2.151	0.128
	CC	49	96.671	17.255				

Table 2 presents the T-Test Analysis of the final English scores for the 2022-2023 second semester. The mean scores were 97.362 for the experimental class and 96.671 for the control class. The insignificant F-test p-value (0.493) and a small Cohen's d value (0.128) indicate negligible differences in performance between the classes.

#### 4.2 Current Overall Proficiency Level of Students' EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension Skills

The first objective was to evaluate Chinese high school students' EFL inferential reading comprehension skills. For this, an initial questionnaire and a reading test were utilized. These instruments, comprising a 35-item questionnaire spanning seven dimensions, and a reading test consisting of 20 questions (with a total score of 40), gauged students' proficiency prior to the study. A thorough analysis of the collected responses enabled an organized presentation of results. Table 3 exhibits the results from the pre-intervention questionnaire for both the experimental and control classes.

Table 3 Independent t-test of pre-test questionnaire between EC and CC Groups

	Independent t test group (Mean ± Std. Deviation)		t <sup>  </sup>	p <sup>  </sup>
	ec (n=49)	cc (n=49)		
pre B	3.278	3.516	-1.500	0.137
pre C	3.500	3.415	-0.968	0.335
pre D	3.463	3.437	0.499	0.619
pre E	3.347	3.410	-1.078	0.284
pre F	3.331	3.367	-0.896	0.372
Pre H	3.347	3.390	-1.078	0.284
Pre G	3.381	3.312	-0.896	0.372

Table 3 details an independent t-test comparing EC and CC groups (n=49 each) across variables Pre B-G, displaying mean scores, standard deviations, t-values, and p-values for each. For instance, the EC's mean score for Pre B was 3.278, compared to CC's 3.516, yielding a non-significant t-value of -1.500 (p=0.137). This trend of non-significant differences across variables (p > 0.05) suggests similar pre-test questionnaire scores between the groups.

Our Likert 5-point scale questionnaire categorized scores below 3 as indicative of poor EFL inferential reading comprehension, scores between 3 and 3.75 as slightly below average, and scores above 3.75 as commendable (Thahira, 2023). Given that the average scores were within the 3 to 3.4 range, this suggests a slightly below-average proficiency in EFL inferential reading comprehension among the students surveyed.

The reading comprehension tests were utilized to provide a more nuanced assessment of the existing competency level in inferential reading comprehension skills among Chinese high school students studying EFL. Table 4 outlines the results derived from the reading comprehension pre-test.

Table 4 Results of reading pre-test between EC and CC (n=98)

Variable Name	Variable Value	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P	Difference in Means	Cohen's d Value
Scores	EC	49	15.7	5.007	-0.172	0.864	0.18	0.034
	CC	49	15.88	5.472				

Table 4 shows an independent t-test comparing the pretest mean scores of the experimental class (EC) and control class (CC), each comprising 49 students. The EC scored 15.7 (SD = 5.007) and the CC scored 15.88 (SD = 5.462). With a t-value of -0.172 and a p-value of 0.864, there was no significant difference between the groups, suggesting a low level of inferential reading skills among the

students.

#### 4.3 The Effectiveness of IBLT Approach in Enhancing Students' EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension Skills among Chinese High School Students

To evaluate the effectiveness of the IBLT approach in enhancing students' EFL inferential reading comprehension skills, this study examined the results from a questionnaire and reading tests, both administered pre-and post-intervention. The results from the students' reading tests are as follows:

##### 4.3.1 The Result from EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension Tests

Table 5 presents the post-reading test results from the 98 participants divided equally between the EC and CC.

Table 5 Independent sample t-test of the reading post-test in EC and CC (n=98)

Variable Name	Class	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P	Difference in Means	Cohen's d Value
Scores	Experimental Class	49	19.837	4.67	2.268	0.026**	2.327	0.458
	Control Class	49	16.51	5.455				

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* represent significance levels of 1%, 5%, and 10% respectively.

As shown in the above table, an independent t-test reported a mean score of 19.837 for the EC and 16.51 for the CC, resulting in a t-value of 2.268 and a p-value of 0.026. This signifies a statistically significant difference between the two classes. Consequently, the EC's EFL inferential reading skills outperformed those of the CC, indicating the effectiveness of the IBLT approach.

Table 6 displays the results of a paired sample t-test conducted to compare pre-and post-test EFL inferential reading comprehension scores within the EC.

Table 6 The paired sample t-test of reading pre-test and post-test in EC

Variable Name	Class	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P	Difference in Means	Cohen's d Value
Scores	pretest	49	15.7	5.007	4.249	0.000***	4.137	0.854
	Post-test	49	19.837	4.67				

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* represent significance levels of 1%, 5%, and 10% respectively.

The pre-test had a mean of 15.7 (SD=5.007) while the post-test averaged 19.837 (SD=4.67). The paired t-test revealed a t-value of 4.249,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating a significant difference in scores. Cohen's d was 0.854, pointing to a medium-large effect size. This underscores the intervention's effectiveness in enhancing EFL inferential reading comprehension. Table 7 showcases the paired statistics between the pretest and posttest in CC.

Table 7 The paired sample t-test of reading scores between the reading pretest and post-test in CC

Variable Name	Class	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	P	Difference in Means	Cohen's d Value
Scores	pretest	49	15.88	5.472	1.484	0.141	1.63	0.298
	Post-test	49	16.51	4.67				

The CC's post-test showed a minor rise from 15.88 to 16.51, which wasn't statistically significant ( $p=0.141$ ). Traditional teaching had a limited impact on inferential reading comprehension. This highlights IBLT's effectiveness.

##### 4.3.2 The Result from Students' Questionnaire

Table 8 displays the paired test results for the EC, demonstrating significant progress across all dimensions of EFL inferential reading comprehension from pre- to post-questionnaire.

Table 8 Results of paired test of the pre and post-questionnaire in the EC

Items		Paired (M±SD)		Mean difference (Paired1-Paired2)	t	p
Pre	Post	Paired1	Paired2			
Pre Paired	Post	15.776	19.837	-4.061	-5.077	0.000***
pre B Paired	post B	3.278	3.911	-0.633	-4.543	0.000***
pre C Paired	post C	3.500	3.951	-0.451	-3.108	0.003**
pre D Paired	post D	3.463	3.878	-0.415	-3.143	0.003**

Paired t test							
Items			Paired (M±SD)		Mean difference(Paired1-Paired2)	t <sub> </sub>	p <sub> </sub>
			Paired1	Paired2			
pre E	Paired	post E	3.347	4.327	-0.980	-7.119	0.000***
pre F	Paired	post F	3.331	4.265	-0.884	-6.126	0.000***
pre G	Paired	postG	3.347	4.313	-0.581	-5.137	0.000***
pre H	Paired	post H	3.381	4.273	-0.691	-4.726	0.000***

\* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01 \*\*\* p<0.001

Note: B-Literal Reading Comprehension, C-Inference and Reasoning, D-Assessment of Main Idea and Central Theme, E-Text Analysis and Evaluation, F-Comparison and Contrast, G-Interpretation and Analysis, H-Application and Self-evaluation

In the above table, the dimension literal reading comprehension exhibited an improvement from a mean pre-questionnaire score of 3.278 to a post-questionnaire score of 3.911 (p = 0.000). This substantial growth is consistently seen across all dimensions (p<0.001). The negative mean differences imply that the post-questionnaire scores were higher, indicating the positive impact of the intervention.

Table 9 Results of paired test of pre- and post-questionnaire in the CC

Paired t-test							
Items			Paired (M±SD)		Mean difference(Paired1-Paired2)	t <sub> </sub>	p <sub> </sub>
			Paired1	Paired2			
Pre	Paired	Post	3.323	17.510	-1.510	-1.756	0.086
pre B	Paired	post B	3.516	3.339	0.084	0.564	0.576
pre C	Paired	post C	3.415	3.400	0.216	1.417	0.163
pre D	Paired	post D	3.437	3.299	0.116	0.799	0.428
pre E	Paired	post E	3.410	3.735	-0.238	-1.348	0.184
pre F	Paired	post F	3.367	3.776	-0.265	-1.800	0.078
pre G	Paired	post G	3.390	3.635	-0.238	-1.348	0.184
pre H	Paired	post H	3.312	3.676	-0.265	-1.800	0.078

\* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01 \*\*\* p<0.001

Note: B-Literal Reading Comprehension, C-Inference and Reasoning, D-Assessment of Main Idea and Central Theme, E-Text Analysis and Evaluation Skills, F-Comparison and Contrast, G-Interpretation and Analysis, H-Application and Self-evaluation

Table 9 presents the paired test results between the pre-and post-questionnaires in the CC, aiming to assess changes in EFL inferential reading comprehension dimensions. For instance, in dimension literal reading comprehension, a non-significant mean difference of 0.084 was observed between the pre-questionnaire mean score (3.516) and the post-questionnaire score (3.339), as evidenced by a non-significant p-value (0.576). Comparable non-significant alterations were observed across dimensions.

## 5.0 Discussion

### 5.1 The Current Overall Proficiency Level of Students' EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension Skills

Drawing from the initial questionnaire and reading comprehension pretest, we can evaluate the overall proficiency level of Chinese high school students' EFL inferential reading comprehension skills. The questionnaire results hint at slightly below-average inferential reading comprehension skills, with mean scores ranging from 3.278 to 3.500 on a 5-point scale (Thahira Bibi TKM Thangal, 2023). These scores suggest a lower level of comprehension, highlighting the need for improvement. Concurrently, the reading comprehension pretest, with a total score of 40 points, supports this conclusion. Both the EC and CC achieved comparable average scores of 15.7 and 15.88 respectively, underlining a similar proficiency level in reading comprehension.

In summary, the current proficiency level of Chinese high school students in EFL inferential reading comprehension can be characterized as marginally below average. This finding underscores the importance of enhancing these crucial EFL inferential reading comprehension skills.

### 5.2 The Effectiveness of IBLT Approach in Enhancing Students' EFL Inferential Reading Comprehension Skills

IBLT effectively boosts Chinese high schoolers' EFL inferential reading comprehension. Students taught via IBLT surpassed those using traditional methods, highlighting IBLT's positive impact. This approach also showed comprehensive improvements in reading comprehension areas, while traditional methods lagged behind. The limited gains from conventional methods suggest a need for reevaluation. Overall, evidence strongly endorses IBLT for enhancing EFL inferential reading skills.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study examined Chinese high school students' EFL inferential reading comprehension proficiency and the IBLT approach's effectiveness for skill enhancement. The initial proficiency level was assessed via a pre-test, indicating substantial room for improvement. The experimental group received IBLT-based instruction and was compared with a control group using traditional methods. The results underline IBLT's benefits, showcasing students' improved inferential reading comprehension.

Given these positive outcomes, schools should consider IBLT for EFL inferential reading instruction. Teacher training programs could facilitate its effective implementation. Consistent monitoring and assessments can offer valuable feedback for teaching strategy

refinement. The IBLT approach, therefore, emerges as a promising strategy to boost EFL inferential reading comprehension, deserving wider application and future research.

Limitations include the study's preliminary status, small sample size, affecting the generalizability of findings, and the quantitative approach potentially limiting the findings' depth and breadth.

### 7.0 Suggestion for Future Research

Future research could employ a larger and more diverse sample across multiple schools to enhance the generalizability of findings. A mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative analysis could also enrich insights. A long-term study could further elucidate the sustained effects of IBLT on students' EFL inferential reading proficiency.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study offers empirical support for the IBLT method, providing profound insights into EFL reading education and research.

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