Introduction

People make inferences routinely in comprehending their surroundings, and these inferences are a critically important feature of human cognition. The fact that such inferences can lead one astray, and that people can recollect vividly events that they only inferred, is a small price to pay for the inventiveness and adaptiveness of the human mind.

(Roediger and McDermott, 2000:123)

Correct and incorrect inferences about incoming information are a natural outcome of the cognitive system. During the silent act of reading, as readers go from a literal to an interpretive understanding of a text, inferences are made. Little research has been conducted on L2 inferences (Horiba, 1996), and no L2 studies have specifically examined male/female inference generation. One goal in most advanced levels of L2 instruction at the university level is to prepare students for the target language literature courses by developing reading skills such as summarizing, paraphrasing, skimming, scanning and making inferences. In most advanced levels of instruction, students are supposed to follow essential points of authentic written discourse and move beyond this by drawing inferences. They process words, sentences and the relationship between them.

Many questions on standardized reading exams expect readers to demonstrate a surface level of understanding and also to generate inferences. For example, in the reading section of the *Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)*, to demonstrate the ability to analyse meaning, the comprehension questions specifically ask examinees to
identify inferences. Furthermore, the guidelines for proficiency-based
global assessments of L2 reading label the ability to make inferences
as an *advanced* reading ability. In the American Council on the Teaching
of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines (1999) for read-
ing, the description of a *Distinguished* reader includes, ‘able to relate
inferences in the text to real-world knowledge and understand almost
all sociolinguistic and cultural references by processing language from
within a cultural framework.’ Likewise, in the *Second Language Evaluation
Reading Test of French* in Canada, the description of the highest level of
reading proficiency states, ‘ability to understand most complex details,
inferences and fine points of meanings; ability to read with good com-
prehension specialized or less familiar material.’ In a discussion about
L1 skilled readers, Underwood and Batt (1996) claim that true com-
prehension requires the ‘construction of a mental model in which the
formation of inferences acts to link the individual propositions in a uni-
fied representation’ (217). In a recent report on revisited directions in
reading research, Bernhardt (2003) comments on the process of infer-
encing and how L2 readers need to attach a relevant or meaningful
semantic field to words in order to fully understand authentic texts.
As demonstrated, making inferences while reading a text is generally
viewed as a more advanced skill, and the goal of many advanced L2
language courses is to teach students to go beyond the literal meaning
of texts by understanding meanings that are not directly stated in the
text. After this level is reached, students enter the target language lit-
erature courses where they are expected not only to infer meaning but
also to produce a critical understanding of the text. (See Alderson, 2000
Chapter 2 for an extended discussion about the difficulty involved in
defining levels of understanding.)

While reading authentic texts the connections between sentences
are not always obvious, and sometimes during the process of reading
readers must access existing knowledge to understand the relationships
between characters and actions. When making inferences, the reader
supplements basic literal understanding with prior knowledge. Bartlett
(1932) investigated the role of schema in L1 reading and claimed that
when readers recall texts they use a schema to integrate new informa-
tion into an organized, mental framework. Since the 1980s, a plethora of
research that examined the role of schemata in L2 reading comprehen-
has revealed that what students already know (the knowledge stored in
their existing cognitive domain) significantly affects their comprehe-
sion of L2 reading materials. But knowing that prior knowledge affects