



Research Article

Study on the Understanding and Use of Sino-Vietnamese Words: Perspectives from Secondary School Students in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT



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Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary forms a substantial and crucial component of the Vietnamese language, yet its inherent complexity often impedes comprehension and correct application, especially among secondary school students. This can result in misunderstandings, misuse, and inaccurate deployment of Sino-Vietnamese words in both spoken and written contexts. Moreover, many secondary school students lack a comprehensive awareness of the broader importance of Sino-Vietnamese words in their daily lives and academic endeavors. This study examines the current understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words among secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City. Through a survey administered to 282 seventh-grade students across three schools, coupled with observational data, this research seeks to illuminate the challenges students encounter in mastering these words. The findings reveal that while lower secondary students demonstrate a moderate capacity to recognize Sino-Vietnamese words, they frequently struggle to distinguish them from native Vietnamese vocabulary. Notably, despite often being able to select appropriate Sino-Vietnamese words in specific situations, fewer exhibit a thorough grasp of their nuanced meanings. Furthermore, their ability to utilize these words effectively in writing and everyday communication is significantly limited, with many finding it difficult to construct complete sentences or employing the words incorrectly.

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1. Introduction

Due to historical and geographical factors, Vietnam and China have shared a longstanding relationship, which includes significant cultural and linguistic exchange. Language, as a tool for communication, can transcend geographical and temporal boundaries, facilitating interaction across national and ethnic lines. A widely acknowledged fact is that contact between Vietnamese and Chinese began very early, resulting in a substantial influx of Chinese loanwords into Vietnamese. Researchers have identified various periods of Chinese language influence, classifying these loanwords into pre-Sino-Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese words, and Vietnamized Sino-Vietnamese words. Among these categories, Sino-Vietnamese words are the most numerous, constituting over 60% of the Vietnamese lexicon (Maspéro, 1912; Nguyen, 2000). These words originating from Chinese that have entered the Vietnamese vocabulary system, governed by the phonetic, grammatical, and semantic rules of Vietnamese. They play a crucial role, particularly in specialized terminology and formal literary styles. However, understanding and using Sino-Vietnamese words correctly can be challenging, especially for students. Difficulties in distinguishing meanings and applying these words appropriately in daily communication (both spoken and written) have been noted by researchers such as Nguyen (1994), Dang (2001), Le (2005), Hoang (2024a, 2024b), Tran and Hoang (2023), and Trinh et al.

(2021). This often leads to confusion and misuse, potentially hindering students' effective language use in educational contexts. Furthermore, the effectiveness of teaching methods and the teacher's proficiency in explaining these words significantly impact the quality of instruction in Vietnamese language studies.

To evaluate the students' ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words, this study was conducted with 282 students from grade 7 in three secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City. The study utilized a well-designed survey and interview system to gather data from both students and teachers, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of how Sino-Vietnamese words are perceived and applied by students in real educational settings. The results will provide an insightful comparison of students' ability to comprehend and utilize Sino-Vietnamese words within the context of secondary education.

2. Theoretical framework

This research, investigating the understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words among secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City, is anchored in the theoretical framework of **vocabulary acquisition**, specifically within the unique linguistic landscape of Vietnamese, a language profoundly shaped by centuries of interaction with Chinese. As substantiated by the seminal works of Maspéro (1912) and Nguyen (2000), Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary constitutes a substantial portion (approximately 60%) of the Vietnamese lexicon, playing an

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indispensable role in both everyday communication and academic success (Hoang, 2024a, 2024b). Consequently, a thorough examination of the factors influencing students' mastery of this vocabulary is a critical undertaking.

A central theoretical tenet of this study is the analysis of the **inherent structural and semantic complexity** of Sino-Vietnamese words. The phenomenon of homophony, stemming from the Vietnamese adaptation of the pronunciation of distinct Chinese characters, poses significant challenges in accurately discerning meaning and employing words correctly (Phan, 2001). Similarly, the polysemy characteristic of many Sino-Vietnamese words, where a single word can convey multiple meanings depending on the context, necessitates that learner develop advanced contextual analysis abilities. As elucidated by Nguyen & Nguyen (2023), these intrinsic features render the acquisition of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary more demanding compared to learning native Vietnamese words, which often exhibit more transparent and direct semantic relationships.

Furthermore, Carlisle's (2010) influential theory of **morphological awareness**, defined as the capacity to recognize and manipulate the internal components of words, offers a valuable analytical framework for comprehending the acquisition of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. A considerable number of these words are formed through the **compounding of Sino-Vietnamese elements** (e.g., *quốc* [nation] + *gia* [family] → *quốc gia* [country]). A robust understanding of the meanings of these root morphemes and the rules governing their combination not only facilitates the memorization of existing vocabulary but also empowers learners to infer the meanings of novel words containing familiar components (Schmitt, 2008). Empirical evidence from regional studies, such as that conducted by Tran & Hoang (2023), has consistently demonstrated a strong positive correlation between the level of morphological awareness and students' proficiency in using Sino-Vietnamese words.

This multifaceted, level-based approach will yield a more nuanced and systematic understanding of the specific challenges and strengths of students in Ho Chi Minh City in mastering Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, thereby establishing a more robust empirical foundation for proposing effective pedagogical interventions tailored to the unique characteristics of the local educational environment (Le, 2005; Dang, 2001). Furthermore, the research will consider pertinent pedagogical and psychological factors, such as teachers' instructional methodologies and students' attitudes towards language learning (Garrett, 2012), that may significantly influence this acquisition and usage process.

The General Education Program for Literature, as detailed in the Ministry of Education and Training's Circular No. 32/2018/TT-BGDDT (dated December 26, 2018), specifically addresses the instruction of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary for students in grades 4 to 9. The curriculum includes specific benchmarks, stating that secondary students should understand the meaning of frequently used Sino-Vietnamese words by grades 6, 7, and 8, and be able to distinguish the subtle differences in meaning of more challenging words by grade 9.

This study evaluates the current understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words among secondary school students according to the following levels:

- (1) Ability to identify Sino-Vietnamese words in contrast to native Vietnamese words.
- (2) Ability to understand Sino-Vietnamese words: This is demonstrated by the ability to determine the correct meanings of Sino-Vietnamese words.

- (3) Ability to use Sino-Vietnamese words: This encompasses not only identifying the correct meanings of words but also applying Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in specific communication contexts, as well as in learning activities such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing.
- (4) Ability to expand Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary from common Sino-Vietnamese elements.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted at three secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City during the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for evaluating the students' ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words. Given the nature of the descriptive statistical study, the quantitative data is the most important for determining the percentage of students who demonstrate different levels of understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words. To examine the current state of students' understanding and usage of these words in communication (speaking, writing) and to identify factors affecting their comprehension and application, qualitative data will be used for clarification.

The purpose of this study is to assess the current state of students' understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words in a precise and objective manner. Therefore, the study designed three types of questionnaires for two target groups: teachers (one questionnaire) and students (the main surveyed group, with two questionnaires) to collect primary data for this research.

The questionnaire for teachers was designed to gather their opinions on the challenges and advantages of teaching the subject of Vietnamese medieval literature, issues related to explaining Sino-Vietnamese words, and providing notes on allusions in Vietnamese historical texts within textbooks. Additionally, it includes teachers' observations about students' attitudes towards the subject of Vietnamese Literature in general, as well as the Vietnamese medieval literature component, and their teaching methods.

The student questionnaire consists of one main questionnaire and one supplementary questionnaire:

- The main questionnaire includes 7 questions, designed in increasing complexity, ranging from the ability to identify, understand, apply, and expand the usage of Sino-Vietnamese words.
- The supplementary questionnaire consists of 6 questions aimed at gathering students' opinions on their attitudes towards Vietnamese Literature as a subject, the Vietnamese medieval literature component in particular, the challenges they face when engaging with Vietnamese medieval literature texts, and their study methods for the subject.

This study also emphasizes the observation of class sessions on teaching and learning Vietnamese medieval literature texts and Vietnamese language lessons to assess students' understanding and application of Sino-Vietnamese words based on qualitative data.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Findings

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, and 300 questionnaires were returned, with 282 valid responses and 18 invalid ones. The survey questionnaire was designed based on four levels: the ability to identify, understand, use, and expand the usage of Sino-Vietnamese words by students. Below are the results of the survey on the current state of students' understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words at three secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City.

3.1.1 Ability to identify Sino-Vietnamese words

To assess the students' ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words in grade 7 at secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City, the questionnaire included a question on identifying Sino-Vietnamese words to explore the students' recognition of these words.

Question 1: Please write down any Sino-Vietnamese elements you know.

Purpose: This question aims to evaluate students' vocabulary of Sino-Vietnamese words and their ability to recognize them.

Table 1. Participants' Recognition level of Sino-Vietnamese words

Elements	0		1-5		6-10		11-15		>15	
Schools	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
School A	23	27.38%	52	61.9%	8	9.53%	1	1.19%	0	0%
School B	15	15.96%	60	63.83%	15	15.96%	3	3.19%	1	1.06%
School C	18	20.69%	50	57.47%	11	12.64%	8	9.2%	0	0%
Total	56	19.86%	170	60.28%	34	12.06%	21	7.45%	1	0.35%

The data above indicates that a significant proportion of grade 7 students at secondary schools did not write or wrote incorrect Sino-Vietnamese elements (56 out of 282 responses, accounting for 19.86%). The number of students who wrote between 1 to 5 elements was 60.28% (170 out of 282 responses), those who wrote between 6 to 10 elements made up 12.06% (34 out of 282 responses), and those who wrote between 11 to 15 words

represented 7.45% (21 out of 282 responses). A very small percentage of students wrote more than 16 words (1 out of 282 responses, accounting for 0.35%). Among the elements written, the most frequently appearing elements included: *quốc* (nation), *hải* (sea), *sơn* (mountain), *hà* (river), *thiên* (heaven), *địa* (earth), *nhân* (human), etc. These elements appeared in almost every response. The specific frequencies can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Frequency of Sino-Vietnamese elements

Schools	Elements	quốc	hải	sơn	hà	thiên	địa	nhân
School A	No.	69	11	24	65	53	13	43
	%	69%	11%	24%	65%	53%	13%	43%
School B	No.	77	48	27	25	2	39	7
	%	77%	48%	27%	25%	2%	39%	7%
School C	No.	50	7	20	43	18	6	30
	%	50%	7%	20%	43%	18%	6%	30%

The reason these elements appear with a relatively high frequency compared to others is because they are quite familiar to the students. They have been taught these elements in Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary lessons at the elementary school level, in the 6th grade (lessons on borrowed words and review of Vietnamese language), and in the 7th grade (lesson on Sino-Vietnamese words).

In addition to the frequently occurring Sino-Vietnamese elements mentioned above, students also wrote some other elements such as: *mộc* (tree), *hỏa* (fire), *thủy* (water), *thổ* (soil), *phong* (wind), *(nhật)* sun, *nguyệt* (moon), etc. These are also elements that are quite familiar and easily recognizable by 7th-grade students. However, the number of words written by the students was not large; most students could only write a few Sino-Vietnamese elements (175 students wrote between 1 and 5 words, accounting for 62.0%), and a significant number of students were either unable to write or wrote incorrect Sino-Vietnamese elements as required (18.8%).

3.1.2 Ability to understand Sino-Vietnamese words

Questions 2 and 3 were posed with the aim of assessing students' ability to understand the meanings of Sino-Vietnamese words.

Question 2: Find the equivalent native Vietnamese words for the following Sino-Vietnamese words: *quốc gia* (country), *trí tuệ* (intelligence), *thủ môn* (goalkeeper), *hoàn mĩ* (perfect), *triết lí* (philosophy).

Objective of Question 2: To evaluate students' ability to understand the meanings of compound Sino-Vietnamese words,

the meanings of their components, and to identify the equivalent native Vietnamese words.

Overall, students from all three schools answered correctly for most of the five native Vietnamese equivalents (69.4%), though there were instances of incorrect answers or no response, likely due to a lack of understanding or misinterpretation of the Sino-Vietnamese words (18.7%). Among the words, “*quốc gia*” and “*hoàn mĩ*” had the highest correct response rates (96%) because these are relatively familiar words, while “*thủ môn*” had the lowest correct response rate (23.3%). This can be visualized in Chart 1 below:

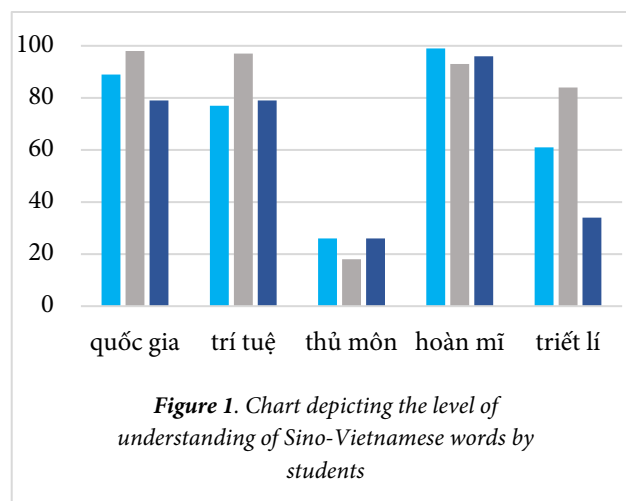


Figure 1. Chart depicting the level of understanding of Sino-Vietnamese words by students

Question 3: Select the appropriate Sino-Vietnamese words for the given content.

Objective: To assess students' ability to understand the meaning of Sino-Vietnamese words through selecting the term that best matches the given content. The contexts provided were as follows: (1) Serious in nature, requiring immediate action, not allowing any delay; (2) A large-scale epidemic, spreading rapidly, causing severe damage; (3) Unpredictable disaster or calamity; (4) Greed to the extent of wanting to take everything for oneself; (5) To contribute, to participate.

Results indicate that most students selected the appropriate words for the given contexts (85.3% of all responses), while 12.4% selected incorrect words, and 2.3% did not provide any answers. This suggests that students generally find it easier to match Sino-Vietnamese words to the contexts given. However, due to the phenomenon of near-synonymy among these words, some students were unable to differentiate between them and failed to choose the most appropriate term.

3.1.3 Ability to use Sino-Vietnamese words

This section of the survey was reflected in Questions 4, 5, and 6.

Question 4: Form a sentence using a Sino-Vietnamese term you have learned.

Objective: To assess students' ability to use Sino-Vietnamese words in sentences.

The results showed that 68.3% of students wrote correct sentences, while a relatively high percentage (31.7%) either wrote incorrect sentences or left the response blank. Among those who did not answer, 19% left the space blank, which was higher than the 11.7% who wrote incorrect sentences.

Question 5: Form a sentence with the following Sino-Vietnamese words: *quốc biến* (national crisis), *gia biến* (family crisis/misfortune), *bình dị* (simple), *vị tha* (altruistic), *bảo mật* (secure), *biến hóa* (transform)

Objective: To assess students' ability to understand and apply Sino-Vietnamese words in specific sentences.

The statistical results show that more than half of the students (59.3%) wrote correct sentences with the given Sino-Vietnamese words, while 10% wrote incorrect sentences, and 30.7% did not provide a sentence at all. This indicates that the number of students who did not write a sentence was four times higher than the number of students who wrote incorrect sentences, suggesting that students' understanding of the meanings of Sino-Vietnamese words remains limited.

It is noteworthy that, aside from not understanding the meaning of the provided words, students made several other types of errors when composing sentences, such as spelling mistakes, using the words incorrectly, repeating words, or misusing the style or register of the words, and overusing Sino-Vietnamese words.

Question 6: Extract the common meaning of the word-forming elements: *quốc*, *trung*.

Objective: To deduce the common meaning of Sino-Vietnamese components based on their use in compound words.

The statistical results show that 228 out of 282 students (80.6%) correctly identified the common meaning of the element "*quốc*" while 24 students (8.5%) gave incorrect answers, and 30 students (10.6%) did not respond. The number of students who correctly identified the common meaning of the element "*trung*" in the words *trung thành* (loyal), *trung kiên* (faithful), *trung nghĩa* (loyalty), *bất trung* (disloyal), and *tận trung* (wholeheartedly loyal) was lower (202 out of 282 students, 72.1%), with 26 students (9.2%) giving incorrect answers, and 54 students (19.1%) not responding. Despite these words being familiar and taught in elementary school, the proportion of students who accurately identified the common meanings of these Sino-Vietnamese components was still relatively low.

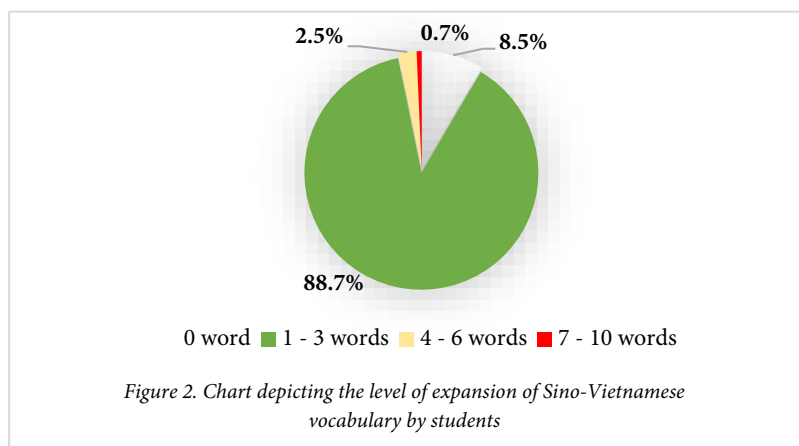
3.1.4 Ability to expand Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary

In addition to the three levels mentioned above, the survey also assessed students' ability to expand their Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

The final question in the survey aimed to evaluate the ability of grade 7 students in Ho Chi Minh City to develop new Sino-Vietnamese words.

Request: Construct Sino-Vietnamese words using the following elements: *sơn*, *bại*, *gia*, *hữu*, *hóa*.

The data shows that over 70% of students were able to form Sino-Vietnamese words using the elements *sơn* (mountain), *bại* (defeat), *gia* (family), *hữu* (have), and *hóa* (transform). The Sino-Vietnamese words that appeared frequently in students' responses were familiar words that they had learned, such as: *giang sơn*, *sơn lâm*, *sơn tặc*, *sơn thủy*, *sơn cước*; *thất bại*, *đại bại*, *thảm bại*, *bất bại*, *bại tướng*; *gia nhân*, *gia đình*, *gia tài*, *gia trưởng*, *gia biến*; *hữu ích*, *hữu dụng*, *hữu duyên*, *hữu hiệu*; *hóa trang*, *biến hóa*, *thả hóa*, *hóa đơn*, *hóa thạch*, etc. However, the number of words created was quite low. Specifically, only 2 out of 282 students were able to construct between 7 and 10 words (0.7%), 7 out of 282 students created between 4 and 6 words (2.5%), 250 out of 282 students created between 1 and 3 words (88.7%), and 24 out of 282 students (8.5%) did not create any Sino-Vietnamese compound words. Although most of the Sino-Vietnamese elements assessed are commonly found in Vietnamese Literature textbooks for grades 6 and 7, 88.7% of students could only form 1 to 3 words, which is a very small number compared to the total Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary they have been exposed to from elementary school through to grade 7. In general, the main reason why students were unable to create more compound Sino-Vietnamese words is their limited understanding of the meaning of the given Sino-Vietnamese elements. This can be visualized in Chart 2 below:



3.2. Discussion

The research findings indicate that while lower secondary students possess a moderate ability to recognize Sino-Vietnamese words, a significant number struggle to differentiate them from native Vietnamese equivalents. Notably, students demonstrate a greater capacity for selecting appropriate Sino-Vietnamese words in specific contexts than for accurately comprehending their nuanced meanings. This suggests a superficial understanding where students can often identify and apply these words correctly in certain situations but lack a deeper grasp of their semantic intricacies. Furthermore, their ability to effectively utilize these words in writing and everyday communication is considerably limited, with many facing difficulties in constructing grammatically complete sentences or employing the words accurately. The study also reveals subtle variations in proficiency levels across the surveyed schools, highlighting the potential influence of environmental and educational factors.

Several key factors contribute to these challenges. Firstly, family socioeconomic status emerges as a significant determinant. Students from less privileged backgrounds often have limited access to academic support at home, which consequently restricts their exposure to and opportunities for practicing diverse vocabulary (Nation, 2012). Secondly, students' learning attitudes play a crucial role in their academic progress. A lack of perceived importance in learning, coupled with the neglect of assignments and independent reading, significantly hinders their ability to expand their Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary (Dang, 2001). Aligning with Piaget's cognitive development theory (2003), proactive engagement in learning and supportive educational environments are essential for robust language development, underscoring the impact of individual motivation on strengthening vocabulary acquisition.

Equally critical are the teaching methodologies employed and the expertise of the educators. Teachers with a limited understanding of Sino-Vietnamese words often face difficulties in providing effective instruction (Le, 2005). Classroom observations reveal that many teachers find it challenging to elucidate the meanings of Sino-Vietnamese words or literary allusions, and some struggle to distinguish between native Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. These limitations raise valid concerns regarding the feasibility of expecting students to master Sino-Vietnamese words without substantial professional guidance (Nguyen, 1994). Proficiency in these words is not merely an academic exercise; it enriches students' comprehension of national culture and history (Hoang, 2022) and enhances their reading comprehension, enabling them to express their ideas with greater precision and sophistication.

These findings align with contemporary research underscoring the persistent challenges in teaching and learning Sino-Vietnamese words at the secondary education level (Hoang, 2024a; Hoang, 2024b; Tran & Hoang, 2023; Trinh et al., 2021). These studies advocate for the implementation of innovative teaching approaches and the enhancement of teacher training programs to improve students' proficiency in utilizing Sino-Vietnamese words effectively (Phan, 2001; Dang, 2001). Equipping educators with comprehensive knowledge and effective pedagogical skills is paramount in addressing the current limitations observed in the classroom.

Furthermore, the quality of teachers' pedagogical skills and their specialized knowledge in this area is of utmost importance. Educators lacking a sufficient understanding of Sino-Vietnamese words often struggle to convey their meanings or appropriate usage effectively (Le, 2005). Classroom observations corroborate this, indicating that some teachers encounter difficulties in explaining literary allusions or in differentiating between native

and Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, thereby compromising the overall quality of instruction. This reinforces concerns about the practicality of expecting students to achieve proficiency in Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary when the support from their teachers remains inadequate (Nguyen, 1994).

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the data collected from the survey on the understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words among secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City, combined with classroom observations, the author conducted statistical analysis to objectively assess the state of understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words by students. The findings show that some students are still unable to recognize Sino-Vietnamese words or differentiate them from native Vietnamese words. Their ability to understand and use these words is limited and requires greater attention from both the educational sector and teachers. While there are some variations between schools, the differences are not significant.

The study also identified both subjective and objective factors contributing to students' incorrect use of Sino-Vietnamese words, such as misunderstanding meanings, using words redundantly, or overusing these words due to insufficient understanding. Additionally, students' ability to expand their vocabulary in Sino-Vietnamese words is also limited. To address these issues, the education management sector, teachers, and students themselves must all take a more active role.

From the causes analyzed, this study offer the following recommendations:

The importance of Sino-Vietnamese words: Sino-Vietnamese words constitute a large portion of the Vietnamese language and play a critical role in both quantity and quality. Therefore, teachers in all subjects—not just Vietnamese language teachers—must have a deep and broad knowledge of the Vietnamese language. For Vietnamese language teachers, however, this knowledge is particularly crucial. They must have strong proficiency in Vietnamese in general, and in Sino-Vietnamese words in particular, in order to effectively teach the subject.

Active teaching methods: Teachers should actively innovate their teaching methods to enhance students' engagement and proactive learning. When teaching reading comprehension and literary texts, teachers should integrate explanations of Sino-Vietnamese words and allusions to ensure students fully grasp the intended ideas of the text. Teachers should also help students understand the importance of learning the Vietnamese language and its role in their academic and future professional lives.

Exercise design: Teachers should design exercises focused on Sino-Vietnamese words, progressing from basic to advanced levels (e.g., identification exercises, comprehension exercises, usage exercises, and expansion exercises) to help students improve their ability to understand and use these words in practical activities like reading comprehension, speaking, and writing.

Student awareness: Students must be aware of the need to expand their vocabulary. For secondary school students, in order to learn Sino-Vietnamese words effectively, they should: read the assigned texts before class, read them multiple times, relate them to the content of the lesson, and try to deduce the meaning of difficult words. Afterward, they should verify their understanding by checking the definitions provided at the end of the lesson. For words that are not explained in the text, students should ask teachers or peers or refer to convenient pocket dictionaries to increase their vocabulary. Students should also diligently complete vocabulary exercises, pay attention to linguistic phenomena, and systematically accumulate knowledge about words. Furthermore, students should read books and newspapers

regularly to enrich their vocabulary, as exposure to words used in various contexts will help them grasp meanings and confidently choose appropriate words for communication. This is an effective method for honing word usage. In their academic activities, students should think carefully about word meanings, and if in doubt, they should check again instead of writing carelessly. Writing carelessly will create habits that are difficult to correct.

These recommendations, though subjective, are practical and valuable in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning the Vietnamese language and Sino-Vietnamese words in secondary schools today.

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