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Studies on Understanding and Using Sino-Vietnamese Words Among High School Students in Southeast Vietnam

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Abstract. Sino-Vietnamese words make up a significant portion of the Vietnamese language—over 60%—and play a crucial role in its vocabulary. However, understanding and effectively using Sino-Vietnamese words can be challenging due to their complexity. This difficulty is especially pronounced for students, often leading to misunderstandings, incorrect word usage (in both speaking and writing), and overreliance on these terms. Many students lack awareness of the role language plays in communication and in studying Literature, resulting in a detached attitude toward the subject, with some even taking it lightly in school. Additionally, teaching methods and teacher expertise influence the quality of Literature education, particularly regarding Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. This study surveyed 600 tenth-grade students from eight high schools across four provinces and cities in Southeast Vietnam. A combination of questionnaires, observations, and in-depth interviews was used to gather data. Based on the findings, this research highlights the current state of students' comprehension and use of Sino-Vietnamese words and proposes practical solutions to improve the teaching and learning of Vietnamese language and literature, with a special focus on Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

Keywords. Sino-Vietnamese words, understanding, usage, high school students, Southeast Vietnam

1. Introduction

Due to historical and geographical factors, Vietnam and China have shared a long-standing 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, Sino-Vietnamese words make up the largest proportion—over 60% of the Vietnamese lexicon—and play a crucial role, especially in specialized terminology and literary style. However, understanding and effectively using Sino-Vietnamese words can be challenging due to their complexity, particularly for students. This difficulty often leads to misunderstandings, incorrect usage (in both speech and writing), and overuse of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. Many students lack an awareness of the role of

language, and particularly Sino-Vietnamese words, in communication and Vietnamese cultural identity, leading to a detached attitude and limited engagement with Literature in school. Furthermore, teaching methods and teacher expertise also significantly impact the quality of Literature education, particularly in teaching Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in schools today.

The 2018 General Education Program in Literature aims to help students develop essential qualities such as patriotism, compassion, diligence, honesty, and responsibility, while also nurturing their emotional and moral development. Literature encourages students to cultivate self-awareness, understand others and the world around them, and develop a humane outlook on life and behavior. Additionally, it fosters a love for the Vietnamese language and literature, a sense of national identity, and a commitment to preserving and advancing Vietnamese cultural values. The program also seeks to inspire students to appreciate global cultural achievements and develop their capacity for international integration. Literature education contributes to the development of general competencies, including self-directed learning, communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity. It strengthens students' language and literary skills through practice in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, builds a foundational knowledge of Vietnamese language and literature, and teaches students how to create and interpret language effectively in both daily communication and academic contexts. At the high school level, while the Literature curriculum does not include separate lessons on Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, these words are primarily encountered in the "Reading and Comprehension" sections, especially within medieval literature. Vietnamese medieval texts are taught extensively in high schools, with selections intended to cultivate students' appreciation for the spiritual heritage of their ancestors. However, understanding the content and ideas of these texts can be challenging. In our view, the primary difficulty for students is not so much the cultural gap between the medieval and modern eras, but rather the vocabulary, particularly ancient Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese terms, and allusions, which can make comprehension difficult.

In teaching Literature, teachers use various methods; however, the lecture-based approach remains the most common. Teachers often present lesson content by moving from the text to its meaning, with few taking the approach of explaining meaning first and then connecting it to the text. During lessons, teachers typically follow the flow of ideas, focusing on conveying the content rather than clarifying specific words—particularly ancient Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, idioms, and allusions frequently found in Vietnamese literature. If students do not grasp the meaning of these terms, how can they fully comprehend the text's content? This lack of understanding extends to their writing as well, where limited familiarity with Sino-Vietnamese words leads to incorrect usage, inappropriate style, and misuse of vocabulary.

The issue of teaching Sino-Vietnamese words in high schools has been mentioned by researchers such as Nguyen (1994), Dang (2001), Le (2005), Hoang (2014, 2022, 2023), Trinh et al. (2021), Tran and Hoang (2024), etc. However, evaluating the current situation of teaching and learning Sino-Vietnamese words in high schools, as well as evaluating students' ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words in daily learning and communication is an extremely difficult and complicated task, so researchers have not had the conditions to Hoang (2014, 2022, 2023) and a number of other authors on the issue of teaching Sino-Vietnamese words in general schools, the ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words of middle and high school students are only case studies.

To objectively assess high school students' understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words, the author conducted a survey of 600 tenth-grade students across eight schools in four

provinces and cities in Southeast Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Tay Ninh. The survey utilized a combination of questionnaires, observations, and in-depth interviews. Based on the collected data, the study reveals the current state of students' comprehension and use of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, providing insights for educators and Literature teachers to develop effective strategies for enhancing students' Vietnamese language proficiency, including their use of Sino-Vietnamese words.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous Studies

Many studies have explored various aspects of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, including its origins, structural and semantic characteristics, stylistic value, and the role of Sino-Vietnamese words in preserving the purity of the Vietnamese language.

The study of Sino-Vietnamese words began with the work of Alexandre in 1651 and other Western scholars, who identified Chinese-origin units within the Vietnamese language and included them in Vietnamese vocabulary statistics. In the early 20th century, Maspéro (1912) was the first to list Sino-Vietnamese words and estimate that they constituted 60% of the Vietnamese vocabulary. Chinese Sinologist Wang (1958) conducted extensive research on Sino-Vietnamese words and published the book *Sino-Vietnamese Language Research* in the Collection of Chinese History Essays (Science Publishing House, 1958, pp. 290-406). In this work, he categorized Sino-Vietnamese words into three types: Ancient Sino-Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, and Vietnamized Sino-Vietnamese, while also outlining phonetic transition rules between them. In Vietnam, the study of Sino-Vietnamese words also attracted attention from 19th-century scholars who compiled practical Vietnamese language teaching books, such as Truong (1877), Huynh (1895), and others.

In the 1930s, Dao (1932) published the renowned *Dictionnaire sino Annamite*, which remains well-known today. Later, other scholars, such as Hoang with his *Dictionary of Common Sino-Vietnamese Elements* (1991) and Phan (2001) with his *Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary*, also made significant contributions. These dictionaries have been relatively successful and have contributed meaningfully to the study of Sino-Vietnamese words.

Research on the structure, semantics, and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words began with articles by scholars such as Phan Khoi, Pham Huy Ho, Pham Quynh, and Ngo Vi Lam, published in early 20th-century magazines like *Nam Phong* and *Phu Nu Tan Van*. However, Sino-Vietnamese words gained more focused attention in Vietnamese linguistic research starting in the mid-20th century, with notable contributions from vocabulary researchers such as Nguyen (2000), Do (1981), Ho (2003), Nguyen (1976), and Nguyen (1996). These studies explore Sino-Vietnamese words from various perspectives.

Nguyen (2000) made significant contributions to the study of Sino-Vietnamese words, with his most notable work being in the field of phonetics. His research on the *Origin and Formation of Sino-Vietnamese Pronunciation* is particularly influential. He continued to explore Sino-Vietnamese words in various articles and in his book *Vietnamese Grammar*. In addition to his in-depth phonetic studies, he also examined the semantics and structure of Sino-Vietnamese units and treated them as integral units of the Vietnamese language. Unlike some other researchers, he analyzed Sino-Vietnamese words from a synchronic perspective, without separating them into a distinct class. His research on the characteristics of Vietnamese, including Sino-Vietnamese words, has been highly influential and provided valuable insights for later generations of scholars.

Phan (2000) and Ho (2003) share a contemporary perspective on Sino-Vietnamese words. However, their research focuses differ. Phan's (2003) work primarily addresses the semantics of Sino-Vietnamese words, while Ho (2003), in his book *Modern Vietnamese Word Formation*, examines the semantics of Sino-Vietnamese units, which he refers to as 'potential primitives' in the process of forming Vietnamese words. Notably, Ho (2003) does not focus on Sino-Vietnamese words themselves.

Researchers such as Nguyen (1976), Do (1981), and Nguyen (1996) studied Sino-Vietnamese words following Vuong's (1958) approach, categorizing them by origin and time of introduction. These categories include ancient Sino-Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese words, Vietnamized Sino-Vietnamese words, and those borrowed through colloquialism.

In addition to these scholars, many others have explored Sino-Vietnamese words from various perspectives, including sociological, stylistic, pedagogical, and linguistic aspects. Sino-Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese words as loanwords, structural and semantic characteristics of Sino-Vietnamese compounds, and methods to distinguish Sino-Vietnamese words from native Vietnamese words. Some of these researchers include Nguyen (2001), Dang (2001), Nguyen (2007), Cu (2001), Anh (2000), Le (2005), and others. Their studies have made significant contributions to the understanding of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. Numerous journal articles discuss various aspects of Sino-Vietnamese word usage, including issues of misuse, abuse, and semantic changes over time.

Research works on Sino-Vietnamese words in high schools

The study of Sino-Vietnamese lexicon in relation to its teaching and learning in high schools and literary works is currently receiving increased attention from researchers. Studies by authors such as Nguyen (1994) have highlighted the limitations of traditional teaching methods, noting an overemphasis on memorizing word meanings without sufficient focus on contextual usage. This research examines various challenges in learning Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, addressing both objective factors (such as curriculum and teaching materials) and subjective factors (including teaching methods and the perceptions of teachers and students). Nguyen (1994) underscores the importance of teaching Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in real-life contexts to enhance students' understanding of meaning and usage. Other works, such as Nguyen's (2011) "The Problem of Teaching Sino-Vietnamese Words to High School Students" and Hoang's (2014) study on high school students' understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in An Giang province, further contribute to this growing field of research.

This topic has systematized theoretical issues related to Sino-Vietnamese lexicon and assessed high school students' understanding and usage in An Giang province across four levels of difficulty: recognizing Sino-Vietnamese words, understanding them, using them in context, and expanding vocabulary. It compares students' abilities across rural, urban, and suburban areas and analyzes both objective and subjective factors influencing students' grasp of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

Hoang's (2021) study entitled "The Problem of Understanding and Using Sino-Vietnamese Words Among High School Students: A Case Study in Ho Chi Minh City" examines the current understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words among inner-city and suburban students, highlighting factors that create discrepancies between these groups despite following the same curriculum. Further studies, entitled "Teachers' awareness of expanding Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary for 5th grade students" and "The problem of understanding and using Sino-Vietnamese words of high school students: A case study of high school students in Binh Duong province", by Hoang (2022, 2023) explore teachers' approaches to expanding Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary for 5th-grade students and examine the understanding and use of these

words among high school students in Binh Duong province. In addition, Tran & Hoang (2023), in their article entitled “The Ability to Understand and Use Sino-Vietnamese Words Among 7th Grade Students in the “Creative Horizons” Literature Series in Thuan An City, Binh Duong Province”, provide further insights into students' comprehension and usage of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary within secondary school literature education.

A review of the aforementioned works indicates that, in terms of phonetics, the authors have clarified the relationship between Sino-Vietnamese reading and the Chinese phonetic system. However, there has been limited research regarding the semantics, stylistic value, and pragmatics of Sino-Vietnamese words, particularly concerning their teaching and learning at the secondary level. Therefore, this study aims to conduct a case analysis of high school students' ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. It will assess the current state of students' skills in identifying, comprehending, and utilizing these words. Based on the findings, the study will provide recommendations for Literature teachers and students to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in Literature, with a specific focus on Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in today's educational settings.

2.2. Theoretical Background

2.2.1 Linguistic competence and linguistic performance

Generative grammarian Noam Chomsky (1965) was the first to introduce the concepts of “linguistic competence” and “linguistic performance”. According to Chomsky, linguistic competence refers to “understanding” that language users have about language, while linguistic performance denotes their actual use of linguistic competence in specific situations. Linguistic competence cannot be directly observed; instead, it is inferred from linguistic performance. In generative grammar, linguistic competence refers to the cognitive storage system in the minds of individuals who are considered knowledgeable about the language in question. Although linguistic competence is common among humans, its level varies from person to person.

Chomsky's (1965) view of linguistic competence as purely knowledge of grammatical rules (also known as grammatical competence) overlooks the social aspect of language. He failed to recognize the fundamental connection between language and communication, instead understanding linguistic competence (a psychological category) in isolation from communicative competence (a social category).

In 1972, Dell Hymes criticized Chomsky for being overly idealistic in suggesting that linguistic competence is innate and that speakers can produce and understand countless new utterances without considering the specific communication contexts in which language is used. Hymes (1972) argued that language is not only about knowing grammatical rules but also requires psychological and cultural knowledge—understanding the social rules that govern the appropriate use of language in context. He therefore introduced the concept of “communicative competence” (also known as performance competence), which combines three factors: linguistic/grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and contextual competence. In this way, Hymes (1972) extended Chomsky's notion of competence to include both psychological and social knowledge.

Hymes's (1972) introduction of the concept of “communicative competence” has sparked numerous debates regarding the distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence. At the same time, it has paved the way for a new direction, embraced by many scholars, which positions communicative competence as the primary goal of language teaching.

Nation (1990) conducted an in-depth study of “linguistic competence” by providing an explanatory table on “how to know the meaning of a word”, addressing both receptive

knowledge and productive knowledge of text. This table includes questions that a person who “knows” a word should be able to answer.

In the process of teaching and learning a language, the provision and practice of vocabulary play a crucial role. It often begins with the first lesson and largely determines the learner’s ability to comprehend and communicate. As Swan and Walter (1990) affirmed that “vocabulary acquisition is the most important and greatest task for language learners”. Other studies, such as those by Gairns and Redman (1986) and Carter and McCarthy (1988), also agree that communicative competence is a key component of linguistic competence. These authors concur with educators that communicative competence is an instrumental skill, as it is essential for learners to acquire other language abilities effectively.

In education, evaluating students' learning outcomes requires a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students are expected to achieve. One widely used framework for assessment in teaching is Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy, which consists of six levels: knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creativity.

To assess the ability of 10th-grade students at the surveyed schools to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words, the author utilized the four-level scale outlined in Circular 22/2021 by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam. These levels are recognition, understanding, application, and higher-order application. However, it is important to note that these assessment levels are specifically applicable to the knowledge contained within the textbook curriculum.

Cognitive level: This level involves knowledge reproduction, memorization, recognition, and the ability to recall data and events that have been previously learned. It means that a student can retrieve a range of information, from simple facts to theoretical concepts, effectively reproducing essential details from memory. This represents the most basic level of achievement in the cognitive domain. The specific requirements at the cognitive level are outlined as follows:

- Students recognize Sino-Vietnamese elements
- Students remember some common Sino-Vietnamese words
- Students identify Sino-Vietnamese words in a specific text
- Students recognize errors in the use of Sino-Vietnamese words

Understanding level: This level enables students to grasp the knowledge they have learned and to explain concepts based on their personal understanding. The specific requirements at the understanding level are as follows:

- Students analyze the effects and expressive power of Sino-Vietnamese words.
- Students comprehend the meanings of Sino-Vietnamese words and can identify and correct errors in word usage and order.
- Students evaluate the role of Sino-Vietnamese words in the development of the Vietnamese language and their significance in communication activities, including text creation.

Application level: This level enables students to utilize the knowledge they have acquired to solve familiar problems they may have encountered previously. The specific requirements at the application level are as follows:

- Students apply their understanding of the role of Sino-Vietnamese words to use them correctly when analyzing texts.
- Students leverage their knowledge of Sino-Vietnamese semantics and style to analyze, evaluate, and address relevant situations involving the use of Sino-Vietnamese words.

Higher application level: At this level, the expectations for students are elevated, requiring them to apply their knowledge to solve complex problems, create new ideas, and demonstrate flexibility in both learning and life. The specific requirements at the higher application level are as follows:

- Students should be able to create texts that expand their use of Sino-Vietnamese words.
- Students must know how to use Sino-Vietnamese words appropriately in various contexts to contribute to preserving the purity of the Vietnamese language.
- Students should possess the awareness to apply Sino-Vietnamese words correctly in communication, considering the appropriate audience and circumstances.
- Students must adopt a scientific attitude towards using and generating new combinations of Sino-Vietnamese words in linguistic activities.

This study evaluates the current state of high school students' understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words across four levels: recognition, understanding, application, and expansion.

2.2.2 Definition of Sino-Vietnamese

Many books and articles have sought to answer the question “What is a Sino-Vietnamese word?” and there are some differences in the responses. As a linguistic term, Sino-Vietnamese words are defined as “Vietnamese words originating from Chinese that have entered the Vietnamese vocabulary system, governed by the phonetic, grammatical, and semantic rules of Vietnamese”. These are also referred to as “Vietnamese words of Chinese origin”. According to this definition, the terms “Sino-Vietnamese words” and “Vietnamese words of Chinese origin” are completely synonymous.

However, some researchers argue that “Sino-Vietnamese words” should not be understood to encompass all Vietnamese words of Chinese origin. They contend that not all Sino-Vietnamese loanwords qualify as Sino-Vietnamese words. Specifically, the term “Sino-Vietnamese words” refers to loanwords of Chinese origin that are pronounced according to Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation. Thus, Sino-Vietnamese words, or Sino-Vietnamese units, are understood as units borrowed from Chinese through Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation. According to this perspective, Sino-Vietnamese borrowed elements that follow Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation (e.g., /mùa/, /mùi/, /phòng/) or are pronounced through a Chinese dialect (e.g., /mì chính/, /sủi cào, hoành thánh/), as well as Chinese elements unrelated to Vietnamese (e.g., /chả/, /ma/), are not considered Sino-Vietnamese words.

Based on their structure, Sino-Vietnamese words are categorized into two types: monosyllabic Sino-Vietnamese words and polysyllabic Sino-Vietnamese words. Monosyllabic Sino-Vietnamese words consist of single syllables, while polysyllabic Sino-Vietnamese words include compound words and reduplicated Sino-Vietnamese words.

The characteristics of Sino-Vietnamese words include being fixed, polysemous, abstract, and imbued with refined cultural nuances. These words are found across various styles, ranging from colloquial to formal linguistic expressions. Moreover, Sino-Vietnamese words play a crucial role in constructing the terminology system.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted with 600 10th grade students from eight high schools in Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Binh Duong and Tay Ninh province during the first semester of the 2024-2025 school year. The goal was to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to assess students' abilities to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words. As a descriptive statistical study, the quantitative data is crucial for determining the percentage of students achieving

various levels of understanding and using Sino-Vietnamese words. The current status of students' understanding and use of these words in communication activities (speaking and writing) and the factors influencing their abilities were further explored through qualitative data.

The objective of the research is to accurately and objectively assess the understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words among high school students. To achieve this, three types of questionnaires were designed for two groups: one questionnaire for teachers and two questionnaires for students, who are the primary population of the survey. This approach was intended to gather comprehensive data for the study.

The questionnaire for teachers is designed to gather their insights on the challenges and advantages of teaching the Vietnamese medieval literature. It focuses on issues such as interpreting Sino-Vietnamese words and annotating allusions in the texts of Vietnamese medieval literature found in textbooks. Additionally, the questionnaire seeks teachers' comments on students' attitudes toward learning Literature in general and the medieval literature in particular, as well as their teaching methods and strategies.

The student questionnaire consists of two parts. Part 1 includes 7 questions, designed to assess students' abilities at various levels, ranging from basic to advanced. It focuses on their ability to recognize, understand, apply, and expand Sino-Vietnamese words. Part 2 contains 6 questions aimed at gathering students' perspectives on their attitudes towards the subject of Literature in general, and Vietnamese Literature in particular. It also explores the challenges students face when engaging with Vietnamese Literature texts, as well as their approaches to studying Literature.

This study also emphasizes the observation of teaching and learning sessions focused on Vietnamese Literature and language, aiming to assess students' abilities to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words through qualitative data.

In addition to the survey evaluating students' understanding and usage of Sino-Vietnamese words—where the questions are designed to range from basic to advanced levels—the study also includes an analysis of student writings (tests) to identify spelling errors and mistakes in the use of Sino-Vietnamese words.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, all of which were returned. The survey was designed to assess four levels of proficiency regarding Sino-Vietnamese words: recognition, understanding of meanings, usage, and vocabulary expansion among high school students. Below are the results detailing the current status of students' understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words across eight high schools in Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Tay Ninh province.

4.1.1 Ability to recognize Sino-Vietnamese words

To assess high school students' use of Sino-Vietnamese words, the questionnaire included a question focused on their ability to recognize these words.

Question 1: Please list the Sino-Vietnamese elements that you are familiar with

The purpose of Question 1 is to assess students' vocabulary related to Sino-Vietnamese words and their ability to recognize these terms. The results indicate that more than half of the students (545 out of 600, or 75.67%) could list between 1 and 5 Sino-Vietnamese elements. Additionally, 116 students (19.33%) could name between 6 and 10 elements, 82 students (13.67%) could list between 11 and 30 elements, and 42 students (7.0%) were able to identify between 31 and 50 elements. These findings suggest that students at the surveyed high schools

possess a relatively good understanding of Sino-Vietnamese words, likely due to their exposure to these terms in the middle school Literature curriculum. However, it is noteworthy that most students struggle to differentiate between Sino-Vietnamese words (both monosyllabic and polysyllabic) and other Sino-Vietnamese elements. Among the elements listed, the elements *Thiên* (god), *Địa* (earth), *Nhân* (human), *Quốc* (nation), *Sơn* (mountain), *Thủy* (water) were particularly prevalent, appearing on nearly every answer sheet. For a detailed breakdown, please refer to Table:

Table of Frequency of Sino-Vietnamese Elements

Elements		Thiên (god)	Địa (earth)	Nhân (human)	Quốc (nation)	Sơn (mountain)	Thủy (water)
Research sites	No.						
	%						
Ho Chi Minh city (No. of responses: 140)	No.	130	104	90	100	86	74
	%	92.86%	74.29%	64.29%	71.43%	61.43%	52.86%
Dong Nai (No. of responses: 156)	No.	124	100	96	102	94	70
	%	79.49%	66.67%	61.54%	64.1%	60.26%	44.87%
Binh Duong (No. of responses: 150)	No.	124	96	98	110	92	70
	%	85.33%	64.0%	65.33%	73.33%	61.33%	46.67%
Tay Ninh (No. of responses: 154)	No.	124	102	100	106	92	72
	%	80.52%	66.23%	64.94%	68.83%	59.74%	46.75%
Total: 300	No.	502	402	384	418	364	286
	%	83.67%	67.0%	64.0%	69.67%	60.67%	47.67%

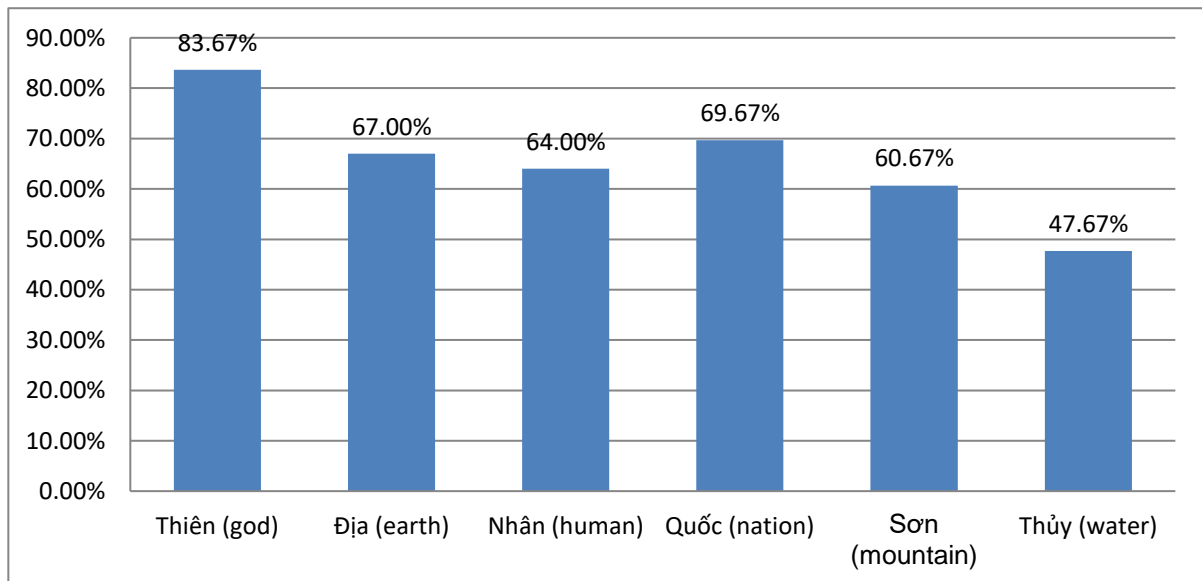


Figure of Frequency of Sino-Vietnamese Elements: *Thiên* (god), *Địa* (earth), *Nhân* (human), *Quốc* (nation), *Sơn* (mountain), *Thủy* (water)

The results (see Figure 1) indicate that the elements *Thiên* (god) has the highest recognition rate among students, accounting for 83.67%. This is followed by *Quốc* (nation) at 69.67%, *Nhân* (human) at 67.0%, *Địa* (earth) at 64.0%, *Sơn* (mountain) at 60.67%, and lastly, *Thủy* (water) which has the lowest recognition rate at 47.67%. These six elements are well-known Sino-Vietnamese words that students have encountered in their lessons on Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary during middle school. Furthermore, these elements frequently appear

in medieval literary texts, which likely contributes to their familiarity among students. As a result, nearly every student was able to identify and record these terms in their responses.

4.1.2 Ability to understand Sino-Vietnamese words

Questions 2 and 3 are given with the purpose of examining students' ability to understand the meaning of Sino-Vietnamese words.

Question 2: Find pure Vietnamese words equivalent to Sino-Vietnamese words from the Sino-Vietnamese words given: lão thành (old man), từ trần (die), mai táng (bury), cố nhân (old friend), nhi đồng (child).

The purpose of question number 2 is to assess students' ability to understand the meaning of Sino-Vietnamese compound words, the meaning of the elements in the compound words and find equivalent pure Vietnamese words.

Out of the 600 students surveyed, 226 (37.67%) correctly identified all five Sino-Vietnamese words, while 356 (59.33%) provided at least one incorrect answer. Additionally, 18 students (3.0%) incorrectly answered between two to four words, and there were no students who either did not respond or answered all five incorrectly. This indicates a relatively high number of students who struggled with the material. Most students appear to lack a clear understanding of Sino-Vietnamese words, often relying on personal intuition and habitual interpretations.

Among the five words presented, *nhi đồng (child)* received the highest correct response rate, with 100% of students identifying it as *trẻ con (children)*, *trẻ em (kid)*, *trẻ nhỏ (young children)* reflecting their familiarity with the element. Conversely, the element *lão (old)* was the most misunderstood, with only 55.33% of students providing the correct interpretation, which emphasizes the original meaning of *già (aged)* or *từng trải (experienced)* as in *nhà cách mạng lão thành (veteran revolutionary)*, *nhà giáo lão thành (veteran teacher)*, *bậc lão thành (esteemed elder or veteran)*. Many students instead offered interpretations that focused solely on the element *già (old)*, suggesting elements like *cụ già (elderly)*, *về hưu (retired)* or *già dặn (experienced)*. This shows that students only focus on the element *già (old)* but not on the element *thành (becoming)*. Students do not fully understand the meaning of this Sino-Vietnamese compound word, so they give pure Vietnamese words equivalent to the word *lão thành (veteran)* as *cụ già (elderly)*, *về hưu (retired)*, etc.

Regarding the word *từ trần (die)*, which is familiar and commonly heard in daily life, students can easily understand it as a formal way of saying *chết (die)* in pure Vietnamese. As a result, a significant 82.4% of students choose the equivalent pure Vietnamese word *chết (die)*. However, some students struggle to distinguish between the pure Vietnamese word and the Sino-Vietnamese word, leading them to mistakenly equate *từ trần (die)* with *hy sinh (sacrifice)*. This confusion arises because they cannot recognize the subtle semantic differences between *từ trần (die)* and *hy sinh (sacrifice)*, resulting in an incorrect understanding that conflates the two words. Additionally, a relatively high number of students are unable to provide an answer due to not knowing the pure Vietnamese equivalent for the Sino-Vietnamese word *từ trần (die)*.

Statistics indicate that 81.67% of students identified *mai táng (bury)* as the pure Vietnamese equivalent of *chôn cất (bury)*. However, up to 1.66% did not provide an answer and 16.67% stated that *mai táng (bury)* is a noun, as seen in words like *đám ma (funeral)*, *đám tang (funeral)*, and *ma chay (funeral)*, rather than a verb. However, it is important to note that the pure Vietnamese equivalent of *mai táng (bury)* is actually the verb *chôn cất (bury)*.

In the case of the word *cố nhân (old friend)*, the percentage of students answering correctly is quite high at 90.67%, likely because this word is familiar to them. However, it's important to note that *cố nhân (old friend)* does not have a single meaning; rather, it has two

distinct meanings. According to the Vietnamese Dictionary edited by Hoang Phe (2009), *cố nhân* (old friend) can mean: an old friend (for instance, *gặp lại cố nhân* (meeting an old friend again)) or an ex-wife or ex-husband, or an ex-lover.

Question 3: Choose the appropriate Sino-Vietnamese word for the given content.

Purpose: to assess the ability to understand the meaning of Sino-Vietnamese words through students' selection of Sino-Vietnamese words with meanings appropriate to the given content.

1. Produce a word that represents the concept of “applying what they have learned in theory to practice”.

- 75.0% answered *thực hành* (practice).
- 3.0% answered *ứng dụng* (application).
- 3.33% had no answer.
- 14.67% answered *other*.

The above results show that the majority of students understand the given content as *practice* (accounting for 75.0%). However, there are also many students who have a vague understanding of the meaning *application* (accounting for 3.0%). *Application* also means putting it into practice. However, what is put into practice is what has been successfully tested by researchers before being widely used, while *practice* means applying theory to practice. In addition to the above answers, some students gave other answers (14.67%) such as *thực tế* (reality), *thực tiễn* (practicality), *tận dụng* (utilization).

2. Produce a word that represents the concept of “past youth, but not old”.

- 86.0% answered *trung niên* (middle-aged).
- 3.33% answered *tứ tuần* (in their forties).
- 5.67% answered *quá lứa* (too old), *thanh niên* (young), *trung lưu* (middle-class).
- 5.0% left the question blank.

The majority of students selected the word *trung niên* (middle-aged) as the most appropriate response, accounting for 86.0% of the answers. However, some students opted for words that did not fit the context or left their answers blank, indicating a limitation in their Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

3. Produce a word that represents the concept of “people of the same country, same race”.

- 87.33% answered *đồng bào* (compatriots).
- 5.67% answered *dân tộc* (ethnic groups).
- 6.67% answered *nhân dân* (people), *đồng hương* (fellow countrymen).
- 0.33% left the answer blank.

The percentage of students who answered correctly for this question is quite high at 87.33%. However, there remains a notable portion of students (12.67%) who do not fully understand the meaning of *đồng bào* (compatriots), resulting in incorrect answers, despite having been taught this word in primary and secondary school.

4. Produce a word that represents the concept of “not natural but man-made”.

- 96.67% answered *nhân tạo* (artificial).
- 3.33% left the answer blank.

The vast majority of students correctly identified *nhân tạo* (artificial) as the term that matched the given description, with 96.67% providing the appropriate answer. The small percentage of students who left the answer blank (3.33%) may indicate a lack of attention while completing the survey rather than a misunderstanding of the term.

5. Produce a word that represents the concept of “provide evidence”.
- 67.33% answered *bằng chứng* (evidence)
 - 5.0% answered *nhân chứng* (witness)
 - 15.33% answered *vật chứng* (physical evidence), *luận cứ* (argument), *thuyết phục* (persuasion)
 - 12.34% had no answer

Most students understood the meaning of the word *bằng chứng* (evidence). However, some students confused *bằng chứng* (evidence) and *nhân chứng* (witness). These two words are completely different because *nhân chứng* (witness) is a person who testifies, while *bằng chứng* (evidence) is something used to prove the truth (of something else). Others answered *vật chứng* (physical evidence), *luận cứ* (argument), and *thuyết phục* (persuasion). The percentage of students who did not answer this question was also quite high (12.34%).

Overall, the majority of students selected appropriate words for the given content, accounting for 82.47% of the total responses. In contrast, those who chose incorrect words or left their answers blank made up 17.53%. This indicates that when presented with specific content, students can generally identify corresponding Sino-Vietnamese words with relative ease. However, the existence of closely related meanings among some Sino-Vietnamese words poses challenges for certain students, preventing them from distinguishing and finding the most suitable terms. This suggests that many students do not fully grasp the original meanings of Sino-Vietnamese elements.

4.1.3 Ability to use Sino-Vietnamese words

The content of this survey is reflected in questions 4, 5, and 6 of the survey form.

Question 4: Create sentences using the learned Sino-Vietnamese words.

The purpose of this question is to assess students' ability to use Sino-Vietnamese words effectively. The statistical results indicate that 544 out of 600 students, or 90.67%, constructed correct sentences, while 56 out of 600 students, accounting for 9.33%, either made incorrect sentences or left the question blank. This data demonstrates that a significant majority of students are capable of forming correct sentences using Sino-Vietnamese words.

Question 5: Create three sentences using each of the following words: mâu thuẫn (contradiction), trung thành (loyal), thi sĩ (poet), khán giả (audience), and nhân tạo (artificial).

Purpose: This question aims to assess students' ability to understand and apply Sino-Vietnamese words in specific sentences.

The results reveal that the majority of students, specifically 404 out of 600 (or 67.33%), were able to construct sentences using the words *mâu thuẫn* (contradiction), *thi sĩ* (poet), *khán giả* (audience), *nhân tạo* (artificial), and *trung thành* (loyal). However, the remaining students struggled to grasp the meanings of the provided Sino-Vietnamese words.

The survey findings indicate that 83.67% of students comprehend the meanings of the words *trung thành* (loyal), *mâu thuẫn* (contradiction), *khán giả* (audience), and *thi sĩ* (poet). This familiarity likely stems from their frequent exposure to these terms in literature classes.

However, it is worth noting that some students not only failed to understand the meanings of the assigned Sino-Vietnamese words but also made several other errors in their writing. These included spelling mistakes, incorrect usage of Sino-Vietnamese words, redundancy in word choice, employing words in the wrong context, and overusing Sino-Vietnamese terms.

Question 6: Identify the general meanings of the elements: trung (middle), chung (general), phụ (secondary)

Purpose: This question aims to assess students' understanding of the general meanings of the Sino-Vietnamese elements *trung (middle)*, *chung (general)*, *phụ 1 (secondary)*, *phụ 2 (secondary)*, *phụ 3 (secondary)*, *phụ 4 (secondary)*, *phụ 5 (secondary)* through their associated compound words.

The results indicate that 60.33% of students answered correctly, while 156 out of 600 (or 26.0%) answered incorrectly. Additionally, 82 out of 600 students (13.67%) did not provide a response.

Despite the fact that these words are familiar and have been taught since primary and secondary school, the relatively low percentage of students who were able to accurately identify the general meanings of these Sino-Vietnamese elements is noteworthy. This suggests that even commonly encountered terms may not be fully understood by all students.

4.1.4 Ability to expand Sino-Vietnamese words

In addition to the three previous levels of assessment, the survey evaluated students' ability to expand their Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

The final question asked 10th-grade students in the Southeast region to construct Sino-Vietnamese words using the provided elements: *quốc (nation)*, *nhân (human)*, *bán (half)*, *hoàng (royal)*, *thiên (god)*, and *phong (wind)*.

The results showed that 570 out of 600 students (representing 95.0%) successfully constructed words from these elements; however, the variety of words generated was relatively limited, with each student averaging around four unique constructions. The most frequently mentioned Sino-Vietnamese words included: *quốc (nation)*, *quốc kỳ (national flag)*, *quốc ca (national anthem)*, *quốc tế (international)*, *nhân (people)*, *nhân đạo (humanitarian)*, *nhân nghĩa (kindness)*, *hoàng (royal)*, *hoàng cung (royal palace)*, and *hoàng đế (emperor)*. Other notable entries were phrases such as *nửa tin nửa ngờ (half-believing, half-doubting)* and *phong tục (customs)*. These findings reflect a solid foundational understanding of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary among students, although there is room for further development in their ability to create a more diverse range of terms.

4.2. Discussion

The results of the data analysis indicate that students' abilities to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words vary between provinces and cities. Although the differences are not substantial, they reveal that students in Ho Chi Minh City demonstrate a slightly greater proficiency in recognizing, comprehending, and utilizing Sino-Vietnamese words compared to their peers in Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Tay Ninh. For instance, in Question 1, high school students in Ho Chi Minh City reported recognizing between 31 to 50 elements, accounting for an average of about 7.0%. In contrast, students from Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Tay Ninh did not record any instances of identifying 30 or more Sino-Vietnamese elements. Similar patterns of difference were observed in the responses to the remaining questions, highlighting a regional variation in students' familiarity with Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. The question arises: why is there such a difference? Although all students receive the same instruction on Sino-Vietnamese words in grades 5, 6, and 7, research identifies several factors contributing to the disparities in understanding and usage among students in Ho Chi Minh City compared to those in other provinces. Firstly, many students lack awareness regarding their studies; outside of class, they often do not complete homework or engage with books and newspapers to expand their

vocabulary. This neglect can lead to misunderstandings and misuse of Vietnamese words, including Sino-Vietnamese terms. Secondly, the teaching methods and qualifications of classroom teachers play a critical role. Teachers without a deep understanding of Sino-Vietnamese words may struggle to effectively impart this knowledge to their students. Observations and surveys of literature teachers reveal significant confusion when explaining Sino-Vietnamese words and allusions in Vietnamese literary texts. In fact, many teachers have difficulty distinguishing between pure Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese words, making it challenging for their students to do so. Without effective instruction from knowledgeable teachers, it is unrealistic to expect students to possess a strong understanding of these word classes.

5. Reasons why students use sino-vietnamese words incorrectly

5.1. Objective reasons

In the Vietnamese vocabulary system, Sino-Vietnamese words constitute the largest segment compared to foreign words in general and specifically to those borrowed from Chinese. They hold significant importance in both quantity and quality. However, when compared to words borrowed from Indo-European languages, Sino-Vietnamese words (those originating from Chinese) are notably more complex. This complexity is an objective reason that contributes to students' difficulties in understanding and correctly using Sino-Vietnamese words.

Firstly, Sino-Vietnamese elements are generally difficult to understand not because they originate from foreign languages but due to their functional roles in Vietnamese. The level of difficulty or ease associated with these elements depends on their ability to function freely or with limited capacity in the language. Sino-Vietnamese monosyllabic elements that have entered Vietnamese and can function independently as words are relatively easy to understand. For example, words like *đầu* (head), *dân* (people), *quân* (soldier), *phòng* (protect), *nam* (south), *bắc* (north), *đông* (east), *tây* (west),... are straightforward. In contrast, monosyllabic elements that have limited functions or cannot stand alone in sentences are often more challenging to comprehend. For instance, *thảo* (grass) as in *thảo mộc* (herb), *cam thảo* (licorice); *ai* (pity, regret) as in *ai oán* (sorrow), *ai điếu* (mourning), *ai ca* (grief), *bi ai* (mournful); *ba* (far) trong *bôn ba* (wandering), *du ba* (wandering),... demonstrate this complexity. The vast majority of monosyllabic Sino-Vietnamese elements in Vietnamese are not used independently in sentences. Instead, these elements are typically combined with others to form polysyllabic words, with their meanings influenced by the accompanying elements. Therefore, to grasp the meaning of a Sino-Vietnamese word, one must also understand the meanings of the elements that accompany it in the structure of that word.

Second, discussing the complexities associated with the use of Sino-Vietnamese words essentially involves examining their characteristics. This can be categorized as follows:

- There are words imported before the establishment of the Sino-Vietnamese phonetic system in Vietnam through oral language, and there are those that emerged afterward, known as Vietnamese-ized Sino-Vietnamese words. The borrowed terms have been deeply integrated into the Vietnamese language, functioning independently as pure Vietnamese words. However, the most intricate issue lies with the category of Sino-Vietnamese words that have been borrowed indirectly through literature (such as *kinh* (Buddhist scriptures), *sử* (history), *tử* (scriptures), *tập* (collection)), which often carry abstract and symbolic meanings. Due to their high levels of abstraction and symbolism, literary Sino-Vietnamese words are particularly well-

suited for contexts that require the expression of solemnity, ancient themes, profound atmospheres, or nostalgic sentiments.

- The phenomenon of homonymy among Sino-Vietnamese elements: Within Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, homonymy is quite prevalent. Therefore, when teaching these elements to students, educators must be mindful of this characteristic. Although these elements are represented by different Chinese characters, they often share a single written form in Vietnamese, making them prone to confusion.

- The phenomenon of polysemy: Language development frequently involves shifts in meaning or changes in vocabulary usage. Given that Sino-Vietnamese elements are borrowed terms, this complexity is further heightened.

Thus, if teachers and students do not approach the teaching and learning process flexibly and actively, it is easy to fall into misuse, as previously analyzed.

- The vast number of Sino-Vietnamese words: With the extensive number of Sino-Vietnamese words, it is impossible for any individual to master them all. This challenge is compounded by the complex characteristics inherent in these terms.

5.2. Subjective reasons

- By teachers:

The most significant challenge in comprehending Vietnamese traditional literature is the barrier posed by vocabulary, particularly Sino-Vietnamese words and allusions. If learners grasp the meanings of these terms, they can more easily absorb the content and ideas of Vietnamese traditional literature in schools. However, research indicates that when teaching this literature, educators primarily focus on conveying the ideas and content outlined in the textbooks, often neglecting to explain Sino-Vietnamese words, idioms, and allusions within the texts. Several reasons contribute to this issue:

First, due to limited teaching time, both teachers and students lack the opportunity to explore Sino-Vietnamese words and allusions in depth within Vietnamese traditional literature.

Second, some educators have a limited understanding of these terms and allusions. Consequently, when encountering texts that contain unfamiliar Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary or allusions that are no longer commonly used, teachers may feel confused. They might hesitate to provide explanations for fear of wasting time or misinterpreting the words and the author's artistic intent, which can lead to incorrect explanations. The limited knowledge that teachers possess about Sino-Vietnamese words and allusions makes it challenging for them to effectively elucidate these concepts to students.

- By students

A reality shows that today's students do not like to study Literature, including Vietnamese. One of the reasons for this situation is due to social trends and parents' career orientation for their children in the future, so they only focus on investing in other science subjects to take the entrance exam to universities in majors that will make it easier to find a job and earn a lot of money after graduation. Because of these reasons, students have formed a mentality of studying to get points and take the graduation exam without thinking about the importance of the subject.

Sino-Vietnamese words are relatively difficult, but just because they are difficult does not mean they do not study them and do not care about using them correctly or incorrectly. One of the reasons that high school students use Sino-Vietnamese words incorrectly is due to the students themselves. Currently, most students rarely read books and newspapers, and the reading culture among young people today is very alarming. Students do not have the habit of

reading books and newspapers and do not have a passion for reading, leading to a poor vocabulary. Therefore, when writing, students lack words to express themselves, especially Sino-Vietnamese words.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

Based on data collected from a survey on the understanding and use of Sino-Vietnamese words among high school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Tay Ninh provinces, along with classroom observations, the author conducted statistical analyses to assess students' abilities to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words. The findings indicate that some students have not yet recognized Sino-Vietnamese words and struggle to differentiate between Sino-Vietnamese words and pure Vietnamese words. Their ability to understand and utilize Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary remains limited, highlighting the need for greater attention from the education sector and teachers. Additionally, while there are differences in the ability to understand and use Sino-Vietnamese words among students from different provinces and cities, these differences are not significant.

The study identified both subjective and objective reasons that contribute to students misusing words, using redundant expressions, and overusing Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. These issues stem from a lack of understanding of the meanings of Sino-Vietnamese words and a limited ability to expand their vocabulary. To address this situation, it is essential to garner the attention of educational administrators, engage teachers in the classroom, and enhance students' awareness and attitudes toward learning.

Based on the causes analyzed above, we have a few recommendations as follows:

Sino-Vietnamese words constitute a significant portion of the Vietnamese language and play a crucial role in its structure. Therefore, it is essential for all teachers, not just those of Literature, to cultivate a deep and broad understanding of Vietnamese. However, this requirement is even more critical for Literature teachers. They must possess a strong grasp of the Vietnamese language, particularly Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, to effectively teach their subject. When instructing students in traditional Vietnamese literature, teachers need to have a foundational knowledge of Sino-Vietnamese words to explain the texts accurately and facilitate students' comprehension. A major barrier to understanding traditional Vietnamese literature is the presence of Sino-Vietnamese words, allusions, and ancient Vietnamese vocabulary within the texts. If students struggle to grasp these elements and teachers fail to provide clear explanations, it becomes challenging for students to understand the overall meaning of the texts. Without a solid understanding of the words in a text, comprehending its overall content becomes nearly impossible. For students to grasp the meaning of Vietnamese literary texts, teachers must equip them with foundational knowledge of Sino-Vietnamese words. To do this effectively, teachers themselves must continuously enhance their understanding of Han-Nom in general and Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in particular. Therefore, it is essential for the Department of Education and Training in various provinces and cities to implement annual summer programs aimed at developing knowledge of Han-Nom or specific topics related to Sino-Vietnamese words for Literature teachers. Fostering knowledge of Han-Nom for these educators positively impacts the teaching of literature as a whole, given that literature is fundamentally an art of language and that ancient and medieval Vietnamese literature was composed using Han characters and Nom script. Without a basic understanding of Han-Nom, teachers of this literature will face significant challenges. Moreover, learning Han-Nom is relevant to modern literature, which is written in Quốc ngữ script. Teachers who possess a certain level of proficiency in Han and Nom scripts will have a stronger foundation and greater confidence in

engaging with modern literature. To accurately understand and use contemporary Vietnamese, uncover its origins, and effectively approach and explain the nation's traditional culture, teachers must have a sufficient background in Han-Nom literature.

For Literature teachers, it is essential to innovate teaching methods to encourage students' active and proactive learning. When teaching reading and comprehension of Vietnamese literary texts, it is important to integrate explanations of ancient Vietnamese words, Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, and allusions to ensure that students fully grasp the content and ideas of the text. Teachers should also emphasize the significance of learning Vietnamese and the crucial role it plays in students' academic success and future lives.

The recommendations outlined above are subjective, yet I believe they hold practical value and contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning Vietnamese in general, and Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary in particular.

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