



Difficulties in Teaching and Learning Intensive Vietnamese through Preschool Materials for Ethnic Minority Children: A Saussurean Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract: In the multilingual context of Vietnam, the national education policy has identified the task of strengthening Vietnamese language proficiency for ethnic minority preschool and primary school children as a top priority to ensure equitable access to education and long-term academic success (Vietnamese Prime Minister 2016). However, the process of teaching and learning Vietnamese as a second language remains challenging due to differences in language, culture, and lived experiences. One of the teaching resources used is *Thiết kế các hoạt động giáo dục theo chủ đề – theo định hướng tăng cường tiếng Việt cho trẻ mẫu giáo 5 tuổi* (Designing Thematic Educational Activities – With an Orientation Toward Strengthening Vietnamese for Five-Year-Old Preschoolers) by Le Thi Luong et al. (2018), yet few studies have analyzed this material from a semiotic perspective. Drawing on Saussure's (2011) semiotic theory, this study examines the difficulties arising in teaching and learning Vietnamese through this material. The analysis focuses on the relationship between signifier and signified, the arbitrariness of signs, and their relationality within the language system. Findings reveal significant semiotic discrepancies between the teaching materials and the lived experiences of ethnic minority children, manifested in linguistic gaps, cultural and experiential mismatches, and heavy reliance on teachers' ability to act as mediators of meaning. The study underscores the need to develop culturally responsive teaching resources and to train teachers in semiotic mediation skills to enhance the effectiveness of Vietnamese language acquisition among ethnic minority preschoolers.

Keywords: intensive Vietnamese language; ethnic minority preschoolers; Saussure; semiotics; teaching materials.

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1. Introduction

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with 54 ethnic groups, of which the Kinh account for

the majority, and Vietnamese serves as the national language and the main medium of education. For ethnic minority children, however, Vietnamese is often not the mother tongue but is acquired as a second language.

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This creates substantial challenges in accessing knowledge, particularly at the preschool level, which is a foundational stage for both language and cognitive development (Le Thi Thu Trang 2016). To address this issue, the Government promulgated Decision No. 1008/QĐ-TTg (2016) approving the Project “Strengthening Vietnamese for preschool and primary school children in ethnic minority areas, 2016 - 2020, with orientation to 2025” (Vietnamese Prime Minister 2016). Subsequently, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam issued Decision No. 5006/QĐ-BGDĐT (December 31, 2021) to implement Phase 2 of the Project, reaffirming the importance of enhancing Vietnamese for ethnic minority children from the preschool level (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2021).

In this context, numerous studies have examined the current situation and proposed solutions to the challenge of acquiring a second language. Nguyen Van Hung and Tran Thi Mai (2017) analyzed the linguistic and cultural difficulties faced by ethnic minority students when learning intensive Vietnamese and proposed systematic measures to strengthen their language acquisition. Le Hoang Thi (2020) emphasized pedagogical strategies that help teachers organize more effective Vietnamese as a second language instruction in preschool contexts. More broadly, Le Thi Thu Trang (2016) highlighted the critical role of early language development for minority children in overcoming barriers to learning. While these studies have made important contributions by clarifying policy needs and pedagogical responses, they have mainly focused on instructional methods and general language support rather than on the teaching materials themselves as systems of meaning.

This gap points to the need for an analytical perspective that can explain not only what is taught, but also how meaning is constructed through teaching materials. According to Saussure (2011), language can be understood as a system of signs, in which each sign consists of a signifier and a signified, and meaning emerges through relations among signs rather than from any inherent connection between word and concept. This perspective is particularly useful for the present study because it helps illuminate why ethnic minority preschool children may encounter difficulties when the linguistic and visual signs presented in learning materials are insufficiently connected to their cultural experiences and everyday realities. In combination with perspectives from second language education (SLE), this approach makes it possible to examine how the accessibility of Vietnamese input depends not only on pedagogy, but also on the degree to which teaching materials provide culturally meaningful and experientially grounded sign systems.

Building on this, the present study explores the challenges in teaching and learning Vietnamese for ethnic minority preschoolers through an analysis of two volumes of a teaching manual entitled *Thiết kế các hoạt động giáo dục theo chủ đề – theo định hướng tăng cường tiếng Việt cho trẻ mẫu giáo 5 tuổi* (Designing Thematic Educational Activities – With an Orientation Toward Strengthening Vietnamese for Five-Year-Old Preschoolers) by Le Thi Luong et al. (2018), drawing on Saussurean semiotics in dialogue with perspectives from SLE. The article aims to answer three research questions:

What difficulties arise when using this material in teaching and learning Vietnamese for ethnic minority children?

How can these difficulties be interpreted through Saussure's semiotic theory?

What implications can be drawn for the development of teaching materials and teacher training to improve the effectiveness of Vietnamese language acquisition at the preschool level?

By doing so, the article not only introduces a new approach to the analysis of language education materials but also provides practical implications for the effective implementation of Vietnamese language-strengthening policies in ethnic minority regions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Saussurean Semiotics and its Implications for Second Language Education

Ferdinand de Saussure (2011) laid the foundation for modern linguistics by conceptualizing language as a system of signs. Each sign is composed of two inseparable parts: the signifier (the sound pattern or written form) and the signified (the concept attached to that form). The link between the two is arbitrary, established by social convention rather than natural resemblance. Furthermore, the meaning of each sign emerges only through its relations with other signs in the system – a principle known as *valeur*. Saussure also distinguished between *langue* (the linguistic system) and *parole* (individual speech acts), as well as between the syntagmatic axis (sequential combinations) and the paradigmatic axis (associative choices). These theoretical insights illuminate why language learning entails more than memorizing words: it is about embedding

signifiers into networks of relational meaning (Saussure 2011).

In the context of SLE, Saussure's semiotic framework helps explain why learners, especially young children, struggle when the signifiers presented in teaching materials (words, images, songs, activities) fail to align with familiar signifieds from their lived experience. This misalignment results in "empty signs": children may reproduce sounds but fail to construct stable concepts. Conversely, when signifiers are anchored in culturally familiar contexts, learners can establish more durable signifier-signified links. Contemporary introductions to semiotics (Chandler 2007) emphasize that because signs are arbitrary and relational, context and networks of associations are essential for constructing meaning – an insight of particular importance in early childhood, where learning relies heavily on objects, images, and interaction (Chandler 2007; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2021).

From Saussure's framework, four pedagogical implications for teaching Vietnamese as a second language to ethnic minority preschoolers can be derived:

Reducing arbitrariness by strengthening contextual anchoring: Selecting signifiers (words, examples, objects) that are culturally and locally familiar enables ethnic minority children to bridge from their first language (L1) experience to new Vietnamese concepts, thereby stabilizing the signifier-signified pairing (Saussure 2011; Chandler 2007).

Organizing semantic fields rather than teaching isolated words: Presenting vocabulary in relational networks (e.g., *máy bay* [plane] – *cánh máy bay* [wing] – *đầu máy bay* [nose] – *đuôi máy bay* [tail] within the semantic field of "transportation") clarifies each word's *valeur* by situating it

both syntagmatically and paradigmatically (Saussure 2011).

Prioritizing multimodality to enrich signifiers: Preschool learners need visual, tactile, and kinesthetic cues in addition to sound and print. Multimodal signifiers (pictures, gestures, manipulatives) “densify” input and support concept formation. Visual semiotics, as developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021), highlights that images have their own “grammar” for meaning-making, providing a valuable supplement to Saussurean semiotics in classroom practice.

Mediating between *langue* (curriculum/system) and *parole* (classroom practice): While the manual represents the system, teachers act as semiotic mediators who translate the abstract system into contextualized classroom experiences through the choice of examples, realia, and interactive tasks (Saussure 2011).

Finally, broader SLE research underscores the same point: learners, particularly children, acquire language more effectively when input is meaningful, contextualized, and embedded in relational networks rather than taught as isolated items. Lightbown and Spada (2013) stress that exposure to language in comprehensible contexts, combined with opportunities for use, leads to deeper acquisition. This resonates with Saussurean semiotics: teaching must design a semiotic system in which form, meaning, and relations are continuously reinforced.

2.2. Core Perspectives in SLE and Implications for Ethnic Minority Preschool Children

Research in SLE has developed a number of influential theories that explain how learners acquire a new language. One of the most widely cited frameworks is Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1982, 1985), which argues that language

acquisition occurs effectively when learners are exposed to *comprehensible input* that is, language just slightly above their current level. For ethnic minority preschool children in Vietnam, this highlights the importance of providing Vietnamese vocabulary within familiar and contextualized settings, supported by visuals, realia, gestures, or play activities. Without such scaffolding, unfamiliar vocabulary risks remaining disconnected from the children’s lived experiences, leading to rote memorization rather than meaningful acquisition.

Building on this, Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1983, 1996) emphasizes the role of communication. Through conversational interaction and negotiation of meaning, learners are able to adjust and clarify their language, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention. For preschool children, interaction takes the form of storytelling, singing, role-play, and peer activities, where meaning is co-constructed rather than passively received.

Swain’s Output Hypothesis (Swain 1985, 1995) further argues that comprehensible input alone is insufficient. Learners must also produce language (output), as attempts to express ideas prompt them to notice “gaps” in their linguistic knowledge and adjust accordingly. In the preschool context, encouraging ethnic minority children to create sentences, narrate stories, or role-play in Vietnamese allows them not only to receive but also to experiment with and consolidate the new language.

Another influential perspective is the Critical Period Hypothesis, proposed by Lenneberg (1967), which posits a “window of opportunity” in early childhood when the brain is particularly sensitive to language acquisition. This underscores the urgency of providing Vietnamese exposure at the preschool stage, as early learning

significantly influences later success in formal schooling.

Recent approaches to bilingual education, especially the notion of “translanguaging” (García and Wei 2014), advocate drawing on both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) in the classroom. Instead of prohibiting the use of the mother tongue, teachers can allow children to use L1 as a cognitive and cultural resource before transitioning to Vietnamese. This strategy reduces anxiety and leverages existing linguistic repertoires to support the construction of new meaning in L2.

These perspectives suggest several key implications for teaching Vietnamese to ethnic minority preschoolers: that it should (i) provide comprehensible input embedded in familiar cultural contexts; (ii) promote interactive opportunities that allow for the negotiation of meaning; (iii) encourage language production so that children can identify and address knowledge gaps; (iv) capitalize on the critical period of early childhood by strengthening Vietnamese from the preschool stage; and (v) adopt flexible bilingual practices, such as translanguaging, to build bridges between L1 and L2. When combined with Saussurean semiotics, these perspectives form a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing the specific challenges of Vietnamese language education for ethnic minority children.

2.3. Policy Context and Vietnamese Research on Strengthening Vietnamese Language

In Vietnam, a multi-ethnic country, strengthening Vietnamese language proficiency for ethnic minority children has been identified as one of the core priorities in national education policy. Language is not only a tool of communication but also

the medium through which children access knowledge, participate in schooling, and integrate socially. In practice, limited proficiency in Vietnamese is among the most significant barriers preventing ethnic minority students from succeeding in school, starting from the primary level (Nguyen Van Hung and Tran Thi Mai 2017).

To address this challenge, the Government issued Decision No. 1008/QĐ-TTg on June 2, 2016, approving the Project “Strengthening Vietnamese for preschool and primary school children in ethnic minority areas, 2016 - 2020, with orientation to 2025” (Vietnamese Prime Minister 2016). The project emphasizes preparing Vietnamese language skills from preschool in order to provide a solid foundation for later schooling. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam issued Decision No. 5006/QĐ-BGDĐT on December 31, 2021, to implement Phase 2 of the project, expanding its scope and improving the quality of Vietnamese language support for ethnic minority children (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2021).

Alongside these policy frameworks, numerous Vietnamese scholars have examined the realities of and solutions for strengthening Vietnamese language proficiency. Similarly, Le Thi Thu Trang (2016) stressed the importance of early language development for ethnic minority preschoolers as a prerequisite for their readiness for Grade 1. Nguyen Van Hung and Tran Thi Mai (2017) provided a comprehensive analysis of the difficulties ethnic minority students face in learning Vietnamese, from vocabulary limitations to socio-cultural differences, and proposed systematic solutions. Le Hoang Thi (2020) focused on pedagogical methods, offering strategies for teachers to deliver Vietnamese

as a second language more effectively to ethnic minority preschool children.

Several Vietnamese studies have focused on developing Vietnamese language skills for ethnic minority preschoolers through traditional pedagogical approaches (Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao 2016; Nguyen Thi Que Loan and Cao Thi Thu Hoai 2022). Some authors propose teaching children to memorize poems, retell stories, and explain meanings as effective methods to help ethnic minority children expand vocabulary and improve communication skills in Vietnamese (Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao 2016). In addition, the use of visual learning materials and bilingual environments has been emphasized, as these visual cues play an essential role in supporting language acquisition, helping overcome “language barriers” and accelerating vocabulary reception (Nhan Dan Newspaper 2024).

However, previous studies have mainly focused on teaching methods and surface-level language improvement, without delving into the process of Vietnamese acquisition from a semiotic perspective. In reality, most ethnic minority preschool children have very limited Vietnamese proficiency and lack immersive environments – the language is mostly used during classroom instruction, while outside of class, children communicate primarily in their mother tongue (Nhan Dan Newspaper 2024; Binh Phuoc Newspaper 2023).

Therefore, the teaching manual and material analysis from a semiotic perspective has received limited attention, despite its relevance to understanding how ethnic minority preschool children construct meaning through linguistic and non-linguistic signs. This study addresses that gap by using semiotic analysis to examine how Vietnamese teaching materials may be evaluated and improved at the preschool level.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research reported in this article employed a qualitative research design using content analysis. Instead of classroom observation or experimental intervention, the focus is on analyzing the structure and content of the two official volumes of the teaching manual entitled *Thiết kế các hoạt động giáo dục theo chủ đề – theo định hướng tăng cường tiếng Việt cho trẻ mẫu giáo 5 tuổi* (Designing Thematic Educational Activities – With an Orientation Toward Strengthening Vietnamese for Five-Year-Old Preschoolers) by Le Thi Luong et al. (2018). The objective is to identify potential challenges in teaching and learning intensive Vietnamese for ethnic minority preschool children, drawing on Saussurean semiotics and key perspectives in SLE.

Both volumes of the manual are organised into weekly thematic units covering the preschool year; within each week, a dedicated Vietnamese enhancement component appears as a brief daily slot that follows a recurrent sequence (lead-in/contextualization, vocabulary presentation with sentence practice, and early literacy integration). The two volumes provide guidelines and activity prompts rather than complete teaching kits, with the expectation that teachers localize and supplement materials (e.g., songs, poems, pictures, realia) according to local conditions.

Three weeks from Volume 2 were purposively selected to represent a gradient of experiential familiarity and semiotic distance relevant to ethnic minority preschoolers:

Week 12: *Mùa xuân ở bản của bé* (Spring in the Village) exemplifies culturally

familiar content grounded in children's everyday experiences;

Week 16: *Các con vật sống dưới nước* (Aquatic Animals) represents semi-familiar content in which at least one anchor item (e.g., *con ếch* [frog]) is familiar while others (e.g., *con tôm* [shrimp] or *con cua* [crab]) are less so; and

Week 19: *Phương tiện giao thông đường thủy, đường hàng không* (Means of Transport) introduces culturally distant and relatively abstract items (e.g., *máy bay* [airplane], *tàu thủy* [ship], *tàu hỏa* [train], etc.).

This sampling strategy operationalizes varying signifier–signified alignment for analysis within a Saussurean semiotic framework and permits an examination of how differing levels of familiarity interact with well-established SLE constructs (comprehensible input, interaction, and output) in the context of Vietnamese language enhancement.

3.2. Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is the Vietnamese language enhancement component embedded within the weekly lesson plans of the teaching manual. This component represents only a small part of each week's curriculum, in which children are introduced to a limited set of Vietnamese vocabulary items through daily activities. Each day, a handful of target words is taught in combination with communicative and literacy activities. Typical steps in the Vietnamese enhancement activities include:

Conversation and contextualization:

Teachers engage children in conversation (in Vietnamese or, at times, in their mother tongue for support), introduce the theme, sing a suggested song, and display thematic pictures.

Vocabulary teaching: Teachers pronounce target words, use pictures or objects to elicit responses, and encourage children to repeat and create short sentences with the words.

Literacy integration: Teachers connect the vocabulary with print awareness, often through a suggested poem or song (e.g., recognizing letters in a poem such as *Tết đang vào nhà* [Tet is coming to the house]).

It should be clearly noted that the teaching manual provides only general guidelines and suggestions for each theme. Therefore, teachers are expected to adapt and find the supplementary materials according to their capacity and local resources, for example, by finding suitable songs, poems, or pictures to support the activities. In many small, remote satellite school sites (small village-based outposts of a commune's central preschool), however, conditions and infrastructure are extremely limited: modern equipment for teaching and learning intensive Vietnamese is unavailable; electricity can be unreliable; and many sites have no internet access at all—making it difficult or impossible to print visuals, download audio files, or access digital resources. As a result, classroom illustrations and teaching aids are frequently handmade - drawn, crafted, and laminated by teachers themselves - often at their own expense and outside working hours. This additional burden not only increases preparation time but also contributes to variability in the quality and consistency of implementation across sites.

Within this scope, the present study focuses on three representative weeks in Volume 2 of the manual. These three weeks were selected because they illustrate different levels of familiarity for ethnic minority children: culturally familiar (Spring in the Village), semi-familiar

(Aquatic Animals), and culturally distant (Means of Transport).

Week 12: Theme of “*Mùa xuân ở bản của bé*” (Spring in the Village) – *bản làng* [village], *mùa xuân* [spring], *chợ xuân* [spring market], and *lễ hội* [festival].

In this theme, the teaching manual allocates a short Vietnamese-enhancement slot each day. Rather than a fixed script, teachers curate a small set of target words (typically 3 - 5) and weave them through songs, rhymes, picture talk, and simple games so that children meet the same items across multiple activities and modalities. The aim is to keep the vocabulary anchored in a familiar spring storyline while steadily expanding children’s sentence frames and print awareness. On the first day of the cycle, for example, the focus often falls on three entry words: *bản làng*, *mùa xuân*, and *chợ xuân*. A typical sequence might begin with a brief conversation and “show-and-tell” around a spring picture board (peach blossoms, village paths, a festive market). As children point and name items, the teacher recycles the targets in short, choral frames (e.g., “*Đây là bản làng*,” [This is the village] or “*Đây là chợ xuân*” [This is a spring market]) and pairs the oral practice with print cues such as word cards or labels placed on the picture. A spring song or rhyme selected by the teacher reinforces the same words; movement or gestures, like mimicking market buying or selling or “opening” the village gate, add a playful layer, keeping attention high. Throughout, pictures and word cards act as stable signifiers for the key concepts, while prompts such as “What do you see in our village in spring?” invite children to connect the new words to their own experiences, thereby reducing arbitrariness in the signifier-signified link and laying the ground for later days in the week when additional

items like *lễ hội* are introduced and recycled.

Week 16: Theme of “*Các con vật sống dưới nước*” (Aquatic Animals) – *con ếch* [frog], *con tôm* [shrimp], and *con cua* [crab]. These three target words are introduced on the first day of the week, as part of the daily Vietnamese-enhancement slot (other words are covered on subsequent days). A typical flow is as follows: the teacher opens with the activity of singing the song *Cá vàng bơi* (Goldfish Swimming), singing with actions and inviting children to mirror the movements; asking the preschoolers quick prompts as follows: “*Con cá sống ở đâu?*” (Where does the fish live?), to elicit “*trong nước/ở ao, suối...*” (in the water, ponds, streams...) and set the context. The teacher then models the pronunciation of the day’s three targets – *con ếch*, *con tôm*, and *con cua*, moves from choral repetition to individual turns, and gives brief corrective feedback (slowing down tricky sounds, segmenting syllables, cueing mouth shape). To consolidate articulation, the class learns and recites the nursery rhyme *Con cua mà có hai càng* (The crab has two claws), with a simple “pinching” gesture on the word *cua*. The slot closes with a fast naming game: the teacher points to prepared animals (picture cards or small models) in random order, and children call out the names, prioritizing the three targets for extra turns.

Week 19: Theme of *Phương tiện giao thông đường thủy, đường hàng không* (Means of transport) – *máy bay* [airplane], *cánh máy bay* [wing], *đầu máy bay* [nose], *đuôi máy bay* [tail].

On the first day of the cycle, the focus often falls on four entry words: *máy bay*, *cánh máy bay*, *đầu máy bay*, and *đuôi máy bay*. A typical sequence might begin with the song “*Anh phi công ơi*” (Dear pilot!), sung with actions and a short chat about what an airplane looks like and does;

a quick picture talk follows using posters of different airplanes. Then, with a toy plane or a large picture, the teacher then pronounces each word, cycles through choral echoes and individual turns, and pairs the oral practice with print cues like labels or word cards placed on the relevant part of the plane. Children are prompted to speak in full frames (e.g., “*Đây là máy bay / cánh máy bay / đầu máy bay / đuôi máy bay*” [This is an airplane/ a wing/ a nose/ a tail]) with turns rotated so items are not repeated back-to-back, and brief corrective feedback is offered where needed. Finally, a simple movement game keeps energy high: the teacher plays air-traffic controller and calls “*Máy bay cất cánh!*” (Airplane takes off!); children stretch their arms like wings, tilt right or left, and take off for a loop around the room before returning to their spots.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The analysis proceeded in four steps:

Identifying units of analysis: Vocabulary items and suggested teaching activities in the Vietnamese enhancement component.

Coding through Saussurean semiotics: Mapping signifiers (sounds, words, pictures, objects) to signifieds (concepts, lived experiences), and assessing arbitrariness and relationality.

Cross-checking with SLE frameworks: Examining how activities align with principles of *comprehensible input* (Krashen 1982, 1985), *interaction* (Long 1983, 1996), *output* (Swain 1985, 1995), and the *critical period* (Lenneberg 1967).

Evaluating with materials frameworks: Using criteria from Cunningsworth (1995), McDonough and Shaw (2003), and Tomlinson (2011): (i) linguistic appropriateness, (ii) cultural

relevance, (iii) multimodality, and (iv) learner engagement.

This study focuses on analyzing the teaching manual as a document. Since the manual provides suggested activities and leaves substantial room for teachers' adaptation, actual classroom implementation may vary across contexts. In addition, the study is limited to document analysis and does not include classroom observation or teacher perspectives. These remain important areas for future research.

4. Findings and Analysis

Within the scope of this article, the study focuses on three representative weeks in Volume 2: Week 12: *Mùa xuân ở bản của bé* (Spring in the Village) exemplifies culturally familiar content grounded in children's everyday experiences; Week 16: *Các con vật sống dưới nước* (Aquatic Animals) represents semi-familiar content in which at least one anchor item (e.g., *con ếch* [frog]) is familiar while others (e.g., *con tôm* [shrimp] or *con cua* [crab]) are less so; and Week 19: *Phương tiện giao thông đường thủy, đường hàng không* (Means of Transport) introduces culturally distant and relatively abstract items (e.g., *máy bay* [airplane], *tàu thủy* [ship], *tàu hỏa* [train], etc.). These weeks were selected because they illustrate three levels of familiarity for ethnic minority preschoolers: (i) culturally familiar content, (ii) semi-familiar content, and (iii) culturally distant, urban-oriented content. The analysis draws on Saussure's semiotic framework (2011) combined with major SLE perspectives (Krashen 1982, 1985; Long 1996; Swain 1995; Lenneberg 1967). For each lesson, the teaching procedure is described and then evaluated in terms of strengths and weaknesses, focusing on four dimensions: cultural relevance,

input/output opportunities, teaching resources, and the mediating role of teachers.

4.1. Week 12 – Theme: *Mùa xuân ở bản của bé*

In Week 12, the lesson focuses on the theme of “Spring in the Village,” with target vocabulary including *bản làng* (village), *mùa xuân* (spring), *chợ xuân* (spring

market), and *lễ hội* (festival). The teaching procedure consists of warm-up activities, vocabulary teaching, and literacy integration. The table below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of this theme.

Table 1: *Mùa xuân ở bản của bé: Strengths and Weaknesses*

Aspect	Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Cultural Relevance	Vocabulary reflects children’s lived experiences, reducing semiotic gaps	Some literacy tasks (e.g., letter recognition) exceed preschoolers’ skills
2. Input/Output	Multimodal input (songs, pictures, conversations) with opportunities for output (sentence-making)	Without concrete resources, activities risk being reduced to rote repetition
3. Teaching Resources	Flexibility allows adaptation to local culture and teacher creativity	The manual provides only general suggestions; teachers must source songs, poems, and pictures themselves

Overall, the Week 12 lesson demonstrates how culturally relevant content and multimodal activities can support vocabulary acquisition. However, the absence of specific teaching resources and the reliance on teacher initiative create significant variation in implementation quality. From a materials-analysis perspective, the lesson design appears strongest when activities are anchored to a simple spring storyline and when the same 3–5 items are recycled across picture talk, short sentence frames, songs or rhymes, and a quick game. Such multimodal recycling is likely to support repeated exposure to target vocabulary and strengthen the connection between labels, images, and concepts. By contrast, early decontextualized letter-focused tasks may weaken the semiotic anchoring of vocabulary, while the absence

of ready-made visuals in the teaching manual may increase reliance on repetition and teacher-supplied materials. Because the manual provides only general suggestions rather than complete teaching resources, its implementation may vary depending on local conditions and teachers’ capacity to adapt and supplement the materials. When analyzing across the four dimensions, cultural relevance remained the key strength, whereas resource scarcity and heavy reliance on teacher mediation were the main sources of variability.

4.2. Week 16 – Theme: *Các con vật sống dưới nước*

In Week 16, the lesson focuses on the theme of “Aquatic Animals,” with target vocabulary including *con ếch* (frog), *con*

tôm (shrimp), and *con cua* (crab). The teaching procedure set out in the manual consists of a warm-up song, vocabulary

teaching with movement imitation, and games/rhymes. The table below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of this theme.

Table 2: Các con vật sống dưới nước: Strengths and Weaknesses

Aspect	Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Cultural Relevance	The word <i>con ếch</i> (frog) is familiar and provides a bridge to introduce new vocabulary	The words <i>con tôm</i> (shrimp) and <i>con cua</i> (crab) are outside children's lived experience, leading to "empty signs"
2. Input/Output	Movement imitation and rhymes create multimodal input and opportunities for output	Without visuals or realia, activities risk becoming rote repetition
3. Teaching Resources	Flexibility allows the integration of songs, rhymes, and pictures by teachers	The manual lacks concrete visuals or rhymes; teachers must prepare these materials themselves

The Week 16 lesson shows how familiar elements such as *con ếch* (frog) can serve as an entry point to introduce less familiar words. Multimodal activities such as movements and rhymes enhance engagement, but the absence of concrete resources and the experiential gap with *con tôm* (shrimp) and *con cua* (crab) create significant challenges. Among the three items, *con ếch* appears to offer the most accessible entry point, as it is more likely to be familiar from children's everyday experience than *con tôm* and *con cua*. By contrast, the latter items may be more difficult to anchor semantically without concrete visuals or manipulatives. Gesture-based cues such as jumping, pinching, and swimming can be seen as potentially useful semiotic supports for reinforcing word meaning and encouraging oral practice. At the same time, because the manual does not provide ready-made visual resources, the

effectiveness of activities such as sorting or matching is likely to depend on teachers' ability to prepare sufficiently clear supporting materials. Overall, cultural familiarity facilitated entry via *ếch*, yet experiential distance for *tôm* or *cua* and limited materials constrained consistency.

4.3. Week 19 – Theme: Phương tiện giao thông đường thủy, đường hàng không

In Week 19, the lesson focuses on the theme of "Means of Transport," with target vocabulary including *máy bay* (airplane), *cánh máy bay* (wing), *đầu máy bay* (nose), and *đuôi máy bay* (tail). The teaching procedure consists of a warm-up song, vocabulary teaching with toy planes or pictures, and role-play activities. The table below summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of this theme.

Table 3: *Phương tiện giao thông đường thủy, đường hàng không: Strengths and Weaknesses*

Aspect	Strengths	Weaknesses
1. Cultural Relevance	Modern vocabulary expands children's knowledge and prepares them for school	The words <i>máy bay</i> (airplane), <i>tàu thủy</i> (ship), and <i>tàu hỏa</i> (train) are unfamiliar to most ethnic minority children; signs risk remaining abstract
2. Input/Output	Pictures, toys, and role-play provide multimodal input and opportunities for imaginative output	The manual does not supply resources; implementation depends heavily on teacher preparation
3. Teaching Resources	Where available, models and songs can enrich lessons	The lack of provided materials places a heavy burden on teacher preparation

Overall, the Week 19 lesson introduces modern vocabulary that could broaden children's linguistic repertoire, but the large experiential gap and abstract nature of the concepts make comprehension difficult. The absence of concrete materials in the manual and its reliance on teacher adaptation may reduce the pedagogical accessibility of this lesson. From a materials-analysis perspective, the effectiveness of the activities is likely to depend on the availability of manipulatives, clear visual support, and explicit labeling of parts such as *cánh máy bay* (wing), *đầu máy bay* (nose), and *đuôi máy bay* (tail). Role-play activities, such as the air-traffic-controller routine, may help create opportunities for engagement, but without additional visual or linguistic scaffolding they may support only limited forms of verbal production. Similarly, affixing labels directly to toys or posters may strengthen links between words, images, and part-whole relations, whereas the absence of such supports may make these distinctions more difficult to establish. Variation in implementation is therefore to depend on differences in available materials and preparation time across sites.

4.4. Synthesis of Findings

The analysis of the three representative lessons suggests a clear pattern: the more culturally familiar the vocabulary, the more readily it can be anchored in children's lived experience. In Week 12, words such as *chợ xuân* and *bản làng* appear more likely to support stronger signifier-signified links because they are grounded in familiar contexts. By contrast, in Weeks 16 and 19, less familiar items such as *con tôm* or *máy bay* may function as "empty signs" when they lack sufficient contextual grounding.

Multimodal strategies such as songs, rhymes, pictures, and role-play may provide meaningful input and opportunities for output, but their pedagogical value is likely to depend heavily on the availability of teaching resources. The manual offers only general suggestions, and teachers must supply their own materials. This may contribute to variation in implementation across contexts, especially in under-resourced areas.

Overall, intensive Vietnamese instruction appears more likely to be effective when it is culturally anchored and multimodally supported. Where vocabulary is abstract or distant from children's experience, its

pedagogical accessibility is likely to depend on teacher mediation and resource availability.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Main Findings

The analysis of the three representative lessons (Weeks 12, 16, and 19) suggests a clear relationship between the degree of cultural familiarity and the effectiveness of Vietnamese language enhancement for ethnic minority preschoolers. When the vocabulary is culturally familiar, as in the spring-related lesson, the materials appear more likely to support connections between signifier (word, image, song) and *signified* (lived experience), thereby forming meaningful signs. By contrast, semi-familiar themes (aquatic animals) and culturally distant or modern themes (transportation) highlight a semiotic disconnect: children may repeat words but may fail to build conceptual understanding, resulting in “empty signs.”

5.1.1. Theoretical Implications

These findings reinforce Saussure’s (2011) theory that meaning arises only when a stable relationship exists between signifier and signified. When this link is weakened, due to unfamiliar vocabulary or lack of cultural background, learners may repeat words without constructing meaning, resulting in “empty signs.” This highlights the limitations of treating language as an abstract system, without regard to socio-cultural contexts of signification. From an SLE perspective, the results echo Krashen’s (1982, 1985) Input Hypothesis: without contextual support, new vocabulary fails to become comprehensible input. Similarly, Swain’s (1995) Output Hypothesis suggests

that while children may produce language, the lack of conceptual grounding limits meaningful output. These findings also support the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg 1967), emphasizing that early exposure must be relevant and accessible to foster acquisition. By integrating semiotic and SLE frameworks, the study highlights the importance of relational meaning, experiential grounding, and multimodal scaffolding especially in early childhood second language contexts.

More importantly, the value of combining Saussurean semiotics with SLE perspectives lies not simply in confirming established theories, but in showing how they illuminate different levels of the same problem. SLE perspectives help explain the general conditions under which second language learning is more likely to occur, such as comprehensible input, meaningful output, and contextual support. The semiotic framework, by contrast, makes it possible to examine more precisely how meaning is constructed or fails to be constructed through the materials themselves, particularly in terms of signifier-signified alignment, cultural familiarity, and multimodal support. These approaches allow the present study to move beyond general pedagogical principles and to explain more precisely why some materials appear more pedagogically accessible than others for ethnic minority preschool children.

5.1.2. Practical Implications

The study highlights the central role of teachers as “semiotic mediators.” In practice, teachers may find and create supplementary resources such as pictures, songs, rhymes, and models, to fill the gaps left by the manual. This role provides opportunities for creativity but also creates burdens, especially in under-resourced highland settings. As a result, the quality of

implementation varies greatly: in schools with proactive teachers, lessons become lively and effective; in schools with limited resources, lessons risk being reduced to rote word drilling. This finding is consistent with prior research in Vietnam (Le Thi Thu Trang 2016; Le Hoang Thi 2020; Nguyen Van Hung and Tran Thi Mai 2017), which similarly emphasized the lack of adequate materials and the heavy dependence on teacher initiative in teaching Vietnamese to ethnic minority children.

5.1.3. Policy and Materials Implications

The analysis points to a fundamental limitation of the current materials: it only provides general guidelines and lacks concrete resources such as pictures, songs, rhymes, and specific games. This design does not meet the needs of second language education for preschoolers, which requires multimodal and visually rich support. Therefore, one major recommendation is to redesign the materials to be more integrated, with each theme accompanied by illustrations (pictures, models, etc.), suggested songs or rhymes, and simple classroom activities. In addition, teacher training programs should place stronger emphasis on multimodal and semiotic approaches to teaching Vietnamese as a second language. Such adjustments would align with the goals of Vietnam's national policies on strengthening Vietnamese for ethnic minority children (Vietnamese Prime Minister 2016; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2021).

5.2. Conclusion

Drawing on semiotics and SLE theories, this article set out to investigate the challenges of teaching and learning Vietnamese among teachers and ethnic minority preschoolers through an analysis of

the two volumes of the teaching manual *Thiết kế các hoạt động giáo dục theo chủ đề – theo định hướng tăng cường tiếng Việt cho trẻ mẫu giáo 5 tuổi* (Designing Thematic Educational Activities – With an Orientation Toward Strengthening Vietnamese for Five-Year-Old Preschoolers) (Le Thi Luong et al. 2018). It addressed three research questions. First, the analysis identified several key difficulties in the teaching and learning process, including linguistic and cultural gaps, the emergence of “empty signs” disconnected from children’s lived experiences, and the heavy reliance on teacher initiative. Second, drawing on Saussure’s framework, these difficulties were explained as mismatches between signifier and signified, where arbitrariness and weak experiential grounding hindered stable meaning-making. Third, the study proposed some implications: the need to develop culturally responsive and multimodal teaching materials, and to train teachers as semiotic mediators in order to bridge systemic materials with children’s everyday realities. The findings underscore both theoretical insights: highlighting the relational nature of signs in second language acquisition and practical implications for curriculum design, material development, and teacher education. At the same time, the study is limited by its reliance on analyzing three themes in the teaching manual without classroom observation or teacher/learner perspectives. Future research should therefore combine semiotic analysis of the manual with empirical evidence from practice to validate and extend these findings, providing a more comprehensive foundation for improving Vietnamese language education in ethnic minority preschool contexts.

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Declaration of AI Use

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