EVALUATING AND ADAPTING AN ENGLISH GRADED READER FOR VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJORS
ĐÁNH GIÁ VÀ ĐIỀU CHỈNH MỘT TÀI LIỆU ĐỌC TIẾNG ANH PHÂN CẤP NHẰM PHÁT TRIỂN VỐN TỪ VỰNG CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH

Nguyen Thi My Hang[1]*, Cao Thi Hong Phuong[2]

[1]The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam
[2]Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: ntmhang@ufl.udn.vn

Abstract - This study examines the appropriateness of a graded reader text for first-year students at the University of Danang, whose major is not English. Using a bilingual vocabulary size test of English for Vietnamese Learners, students' vocabulary size was estimated at slightly above the 2,000-word level. The selected text was analyzed using the RANGE program to determine lexical coverage, revealing that the first 2,000-word families account for 93.09% of the running words. The study explores methods such as pre-teaching, glossing, and simplifying to improve comprehension and facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Findings suggest that adapting texts to reach 98% known word coverage can enhance reading comprehension and incidental vocabulary learning, supporting extensive reading as a viable strategy for language growth.

Key words - Vocabulary learning; graded readers; text adaptation; extensive reading; lexical coverage

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu này đánh giá mức độ phù hợp của một văn bản đọc theo cấp độ dành cho sinh viên năm nhất tại Đại học Đà Nẵng, tiếng Anh không chuyên. Thông qua bài kiểm tra kích thước từ vựng song ngữ dành cho người học tiếng Anh là người Việt, vốn từ vựng của sinh viên được ước tính ở mức hơi cao hơn 2.000 từ. Văn bản được chọn đã được phân tích bằng phần mềm RANGE để xác định độ bao phủ từ vựng, cho thấy 2.000 nhóm từ đầu tiên chiếm 93,09% tổng số từ. Nghiên cứu này khám phá các phương pháp như dạy trước từ vựng, chú giải, và đơn giản hóa để cải thiện sự hiểu biết và hỗ trợ việc tiếp thu từ vựng. Kết quả cho thấy, việc điều chỉnh văn bản để đạt được độ bao phủ từ vựng ở mức 98% từ quen thuộc có thể tăng cường khả năng đọc hiểu văn bản và học thêm từ vựng mới, đồng thời hỗ trợ việc đọc mở rộng như một chiến lược khả thi để phát triển ngôn ngữ.

Từ khóa - Học từ vựng; sách đọc phân cấp; điều chỉnh văn bản; đọc mở rộng; độ bao phủ từ vựng

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in language acquisition and reading comprehension [1]. It forms the foundation of language proficiency, enabling learners to understand and produce both spoken and written communication. Research has demonstrated that a strong vocabulary not only enhances reading comprehension but also facilitates vocabulary growth through extensive exposure to texts [2]. However, not all texts effectively support vocabulary learning. Selecting appropriate reading materials that match learners' proficiency levels and address their learning needs is critical for achieving educational objectives.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, graded readers are commonly used to support extensive reading and foster vocabulary development. Yet, ensuring that these materials meet the recommended lexical coverage thresholds, necessary for comprehension and independent reading, remains a challenge. In the context of Vietnam, English is taught as a compulsory subject at universities, yet many learners, particularly non-English majors, struggle with vocabulary acquisition due to limited exposure to authentic English input. Previous studies in Vietnam have explored vocabulary size among university students and highlighted the mismatch between learners' lexical knowledge and the demands of English reading materials, especially graded readers. For instance, Nguyen and Nation [3] developed a bilingual vocabulary size test specifically for Vietnamese learners, revealing that many students possess a vocabulary size far below the level needed for independent reading. However, few studies have investigated the lexical demands of specific texts and how text adaptation strategies can be applied to bridge this gap. This study addresses that void by analyzing the lexical coverage of a selected graded reader and proposing practical methods to adjust the text, aiming to enhance vocabulary learning and reading comprehension for Vietnamese EFL learners.

This study evaluates the appropriateness of a graded reader text for Vietnamese EFL learners and investigates how text adaptation strategies can improve comprehension and facilitate vocabulary retention.

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What is the lexical coverage of the selected graded reader text for Vietnamese EFL learners?

RQ2. To what extent does the text align with the recommended threshold for reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition?

RQ3. How can text adaptation strategies (pre-teaching, glossing, and simplification) improve comprehension and support vocabulary learning?

2. Literature review

Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of second language acquisition, significantly influencing both reading comprehension and overall language proficiency [2]. Research has consistently highlighted the importance of lexical coverage in reading comprehension. For learners to achieve adequate understanding of a text, it is generally agreed that they need to know at least 95% of the words, with 98% being the threshold for independent reading [4].

Extensive reading has been widely recognized as an effective approach for promoting vocabulary acquisition [1]. By engaging with texts containing a manageable proportion of unfamiliar words, learners can infer meanings from context and reinforce word retention through repeated exposure [5]. However, the success of incidental vocabulary learning through reading depends on several factors, including the learner's existing vocabulary knowledge, the complexity of the text, and the frequency of word encounters [6].

To support vocabulary acquisition, several instructional strategies have been proposed. Pre-teaching vocabulary has been shown to improve comprehension and facilitate the retention of low-frequency words, particularly when these words are likely to impede understanding of the text [1]. Glossing, especially when provided in learners' first language, has been found to enhance reading fluency and support vocabulary retention without significantly disrupting the reading process [7]. Conversely, text simplification increases readability by replacing complex or low-frequency words with simpler alternatives, but it may limit learners' exposure to authentic language, raising concerns about its long-term effectiveness for vocabulary development [8].

The theoretical framework guiding this study is based on Nation's lexical coverage model [2], which offers a structured approach to evaluating the suitability of texts for vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. According to Nation, successful reading depends significantly on the proportion of familiar words in a text, with 95% lexical coverage being the minimum requirement for general comprehension, and 98% serving as the ideal threshold for unassisted, fluent reading and incidental vocabulary acquisition. These percentages are widely accepted in vocabulary acquisition research as critical benchmarks for determining the appropriateness of texts used in extensive reading programs [4].

This framework informs both the evaluation and adaptation of the graded reader used in this study. By calculating the percentage of running words covered by learners' existing vocabulary size (estimated at the 2,000-word level), the study assesses whether the text meets the required lexical thresholds. Furthermore, Nation's model supports the use of pedagogical strategies such as pre-teaching frequently occurring unfamiliar words, glossing low-frequency items, and simplifying complex vocabulary. These adaptations aim to bridge the lexical gap and enable learners to reach the 98% threshold necessary for effective vocabulary learning through reading. The model also aligns with principles of extensive input and incremental vocabulary growth, as learners encounter and retain new vocabulary in meaningful contexts over time.

To evaluate the appropriateness of a text for vocabulary learning, particularly in the context of extensive reading for EFL learners, several key criteria derived from the theoretical framework can be applied:

1. Lexical coverage: A fundamental criterion is the percentage of known words in a text. Research recommends a minimum of 95% lexical coverage for general comprehension and 98% for unassisted reading and effective vocabulary acquisition [4].

2. Word frequency distribution: Texts should contain a high proportion of high-frequency words. These support learner comprehension and facilitate incidental learning through repeated encounters [2].

3. Repetition of unknown words: Words that appear multiple times are more likely to be acquired incidentally. If low-frequency words occur frequently (e.g., five or more times), they may be suitable for pre-teaching or glossing [2].

4. Adaptability of the text: The ability to modify a text (by pre-teaching, glossing, or simplifying) without compromising its coherence or appeal is critical. These techniques help ensure that learners can comprehend and benefit from reading input [9].

These criteria were used in the present study to evaluate and adapt a graded reader for Vietnamese EFL learners, aiming to optimize the text for both comprehension and vocabulary development. This study aligns with recent research advocating for a balanced approach to text adaptation. Specifically, it focuses on integrating pre-teaching, glossing, and controlled simplification as strategies to optimize reading materials for EFL learners. These adaptations aim to strike a balance between comprehensibility and exposure to rich linguistic input, ultimately supporting both comprehension and vocabulary growth.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study involved 47 first-year undergraduate students from an intact class at Da Nang University. All participants were Vietnamese and enrolled in non-English majors such as Economics, Information Technology, and Engineering. Although English was a compulsory subject in their program, the students were considered low-intermediate learners based on their placement scores and classroom performance. The coursebook in use was *Life – Elementary* (National Geographic Learning), which focuses on developing foundational communicative skills. To estimate the learners' vocabulary knowledge, the Bilingual Vocabulary Size Test of English for Vietnamese Learners [3] was administered. This diagnostic tool assesses receptive vocabulary knowledge in bands of 1,000-word families up to 5,000, using a multiple-choice format with bilingual (English

Vietnamese) items to improve accessibility and reduce test anxiety. The paper-based test was conducted during class time under teacher supervision. Results showed that the average vocabulary size of the participants was slightly above the 2,000-word level, indicating a need for carefully selected reading input for vocabulary development.

3.2. Text selection and analysis

The fiction story The Christmas Bells (see Appendix 1) was selected for its narrative simplicity and minimal cultural knowledge demands, making it appropriate for learners with limited vocabulary. The text comprises 1,057 words and was analyzed using the RANGE program [10] to determine word frequency distribution and lexical coverage. RANGE was chosen for its reliability in identifying the frequency levels of word families based on the British National Corpus (BNC) and other standard lists. Lexical coverage was calculated across 14 word-frequency bands, allowing researchers to determine the proportion of words that fell within each frequency range. This analysis provided the basis for selecting appropriate adaptation strategies, such as pre-teaching, glossing, and simplification, to enhance comprehension and support vocabulary learning.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Lexical coverage and text appropriateness

To address RQ1 and RQ2, and to apply the first two evaluation criteria – lexical coverage and word frequency distribution – this section presents a detailed analysis of the selected graded reader using the RANGE program. The analysis determines whether the proportion of known words in the text is sufficient to support reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, based on Nation's lexical thresholds [2]. The RANGE analysis (see Table 1) revealed that the first two 1,000 word-families accounted for 93.09% of the words, indicating that a significant proportion of high-frequency words appeared in the text. Mid-frequency words (3,000–9,000 levels) contributed 2.55%, while low-frequency words (10,000–14,000 levels) made up only 0.09%. Additionally, one proper noun, "Pedro", comprised 1.70% of the running words, and the interjections "Ah" and "Oh" accounted for 0.38% of the text. Two out-of-list words, "jeweled" and "pealed", were identified; however, removing the suffix "-ed" categorized them into the 3,000 and 13,000 word-families, respectively.

In response to RQ2, the study determined the extent to which the selected graded reader aligned with recommended lexical coverage thresholds by analyzing the text using the RANGE program. The analysis showed that the first 2,000-word families accounted for 93.09% of the running words. When proper nouns (1.70%) and interjections (0.38%) were included – assuming these are easily recognized by learners – the overall lexical coverage increased to 95.17%. This calculation confirmed that learners with a vocabulary size of approximately 2,000-word families would be able to understand the majority of the text. While this level

surpassed the 95% threshold often cited as the minimum for general comprehension [4], it fell short of the 98% threshold needed for fluent, independent reading and effective incidental vocabulary learning [4]. This lexical gap highlighted the necessity of adapting the text through targeted instructional strategies to enhance comprehensibility and support vocabulary acquisition.

Table 1. Percentage coverage and word families at fourteen 1,000-word levels of the original text

1000-word levels	Percentage coverage	Number of word families
1st 1000	86.47 (86.47)	199
2nd 1000	6.62 (93.09)	29
3rd 1000	1.99 (95.08)	15
4th 1000	0.76 (95.84)	6
5th 1000	0.28 (96.12)	3
6th 1000	0.00 (96.12)	0
7th 1000	0.28 (96.4)	3
8th 1000	1.23 (97.63)	3
9th 1000	0.00 (97.63)	0
10th 1000	0.00 (97.63)	0
11th 1000	0.00 (97.63)	0
12th 1000	0.09 (97.72)	1
13th 1000	0.00 (97.72)	0
14th 1000	0.00 (97.72)	0
Proper nouns	1.70 (99.42)	1
Interjections	0.38 (99.80)	2
Out of list	0.20 (100)	??

4.2. Effects of text adaptation strategies on comprehension and vocabulary learning

In response to RQ3, this section examines how text adaptation strategies, including pre-teaching, glossing, and simplification, were implemented to improve the text's appropriateness. These strategies are aligned with the evaluation criteria regarding the repetition of unknown words and the adaptability of the text, as outlined in the theoretical framework.

To reach 98% coverage of the text, firstly, frequency of occurrence of words outside the 2,000 level (excluding proper nouns and interjections) is counted (see Table 2), then proper methods of pre-teaching, glossing and simplification are chosen to deal with these words.

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of words outside the 2,000 level which are not proper nouns and interjections

Total words outside 2,000 level	Words occurring 1 or 2 times	Words occurring 3-5 times	Words occurring 10 times or more
34	31	2	1

As shown in Table 2, there are 34 word types outside the 2,000-word level, excluding proper nouns and interjections. Among these, 31 words occur only once or twice and are therefore not selected for pre-teaching, as such low frequency does not support vocabulary acquisition [2]. Two words appear between three and five times, including *Eve*, which appears exactly five times and

is considered for pre-teaching. One word, *altar*, appears 11 times and is also pre-taught due to its high frequency and potential influence on comprehension. This analysis helps determine which words warrant instructional support through strategies such as pre-teaching or glossing (see Table 3).

Table 3. Repeated headwords at mid-frequency and low-frequency word level

Word list (1,000)	Repeated headwords
3	bow, creep, crown, distress, eve (5), jewel, marched, organ, shine, silence (2), silver (2), soldier, starve, tread, wrist
4	angel, arise (3), choir, cling, heap, sword
5	aisle, hymn, shiver
6	0
7	brisk, solemn, whine
8	altar (11), anthem, stately
9	0
10	0
11	0
12	haughty
13	peal
14	0

The remaining 18 words outside the 2,000-word level were either simplified or glossed. Of these, seven were included in the glossary because no suitable synonym or equivalent expression could be found within the first two 1,000-word families. Glossed words are formatted in bold, italic, and underlined (e.g., *whine*), as shown in Appendix 2. Glossing aims to enhance comprehension and is placed in the margins near the glossed words to minimize disruption during reading. According to Yanagisawa et al. [8], for learners with a vocabulary size of around 2,000 words, glosses in their first language are more effective because creating meaningful L2 glosses using only the most common English words is challenging. Therefore, all glosses in this study were written in Vietnamese.

The other 11 challenging words were replaced with simpler alternatives. Words needing simplification are shown in brackets and italics (e.g., *briskly*), while the substituted words are bolded (e.g., quickly).

The fully modified text, reaching a lexical coverage of 98.01%, is presented in Appendix 2. For learners, the items in brackets are omitted. At this level of coverage, students can read the text with sufficient understanding and acquire new vocabulary through contextual exposure.

In summary, of the 34 unknown words in the text, 14 were retained for incidental learning. Two words were pre-taught due to their frequent occurrence, which might hinder comprehension. Seven words were glossed with Vietnamese definitions, and the remaining 11 were simplified using synonyms or equivalent expressions.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates how a graded reader text, The Christmas Bells, can be adapted to better suit learners' vocabulary levels. By analyzing the text's lexical coverage, it was established that achieving 98% known word coverage is essential for facilitating comprehension and supporting vocabulary acquisition. To reach this target, three key strategies were applied: pre-teaching frequently occurring unfamiliar words, glossing challenging words with Vietnamese definitions, and simplifying low-frequency words.

These methods not only enhanced text comprehensibility but also created opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning. While the focus was on comprehension, the findings highlight the importance of providing learners with frequent exposure to level-appropriate reading materials. Encouraging students to select from a diverse range of engaging and suitably challenging texts can further foster their interest in reading and support their long-term language development.

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APPENDIX 1
ORIGINAL STORY
THE CHRISTMAS BELLS

Long, long ago, in a far away city, there was a large church. The tower of this church was so high that it seemed to touch the clouds, and in the high tower there were three wonderful bells. When they rang, they made sweet music.

There was something strange about these bells. They were never heard to ring except on Christmas Eve, and no one knew who rang them.

Some people thought it was the wind blowing through the tower. Others thought the angels rang them when a gift pleased the Christ Child.

Although the people did not know what rang the bells, they loved to hear them. They would come from miles around to listen to the wonderful music. When they had heard the bells, they would go out of the church, silent but happy. Then all would go back to their homes feeling that Christmas had come, indeed.

One Christmas Eve the people in the church waited and waited, but the bells did not ring. Silently and sadly they went home. Christmas after Christmas came and went. Nearly one hundred years passed by, and in all that time the bells did not ring.

People sometimes asked one another, "Do you suppose the bells ever did ring?"

"Yes," said one very old man. "I have often heard my father tell how beautifully they rang on Christmas Eve. There was more love in the world then."

Every Christmas eve the church was filled with people who waited and listened. They hoped that the bells would ring again as they had rung long ago. Though many gifts were laid on the altar, still the bells did not ring.

Christmas was near at hand again, and everyone was happy.

Not far from the city two little brothers lived on a farm – Pedro and Little Brother.

Their father was poor and had no gift to lay on the altar. But Pedro had saved all his earnings, and he had one shining silver piece. His father had promised the little boys that they might go to the church on Christmas Eve and take the gift.

It was quite dark when the lads started on their way to the city. The snow was falling fast, but they buttoned their little jackets close about them and walked along briskly. They were not far from the church when they heard a low whine of distress. Little Brother, clinging to Pedro in fear, cried, "What is it, Pedro, what is it?"

Pedro ran across the street, and there under a small heap of snow, what do you think he found? A little black and white dog, shivering with cold, and nearly starved. Pedro opened his jacket, and put the dog inside to keep it warm.

"You will have to go to the church alone, Little Brother," Pedro said. "I must take this little dog back to the farm, and give it food, else it will die."

"But I don't want to go alone, Pedro," said Little Brother.

"Won't you please go and put my gift on the altar, Little Brother? I wish so much to have it there tonight."

"Yes, Pedro, I will," said Little Brother.

He took the gift and started toward the church. Pedro turned and went home.

When Little Brother came to the great stone church and looked up at the high tower, he felt that he could not go in alone. He stood outside a long time watching the people as they passed in. At last he entered quietly and took a seat in a corner.

When Little Brother went into the church, all the people were seated. They sat quietly hoping that at last the bells would ring again as in the days of old.

The organ pealed out a Christmas hymn. The choir and the people arose, and all sang the grand old anthem. Then a solemn voice said, "Bring now your gifts to the altar."

The king arose and went forward with stately tread. Bowing before the altar, he laid upon it his golden crown. Then he walked proudly back to his seat. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

Then the queen arose and with haughty step walked to the front. She took from her neck and wrists her beautiful jewels and laid them upon the altar. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

Then the soldiers came marching proudly forward. They took their jeweled swords from their belts and laid them upon the altar. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

Then the rich men came hurrying forward. They counted great sums of gold and laid them in a businesslike way upon the altar. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

"Can I go all alone to the front of the church and lay this small gift on the altar?" said Little Brother. "Oh, how can I? How can I?"

Then he said, "But I told Pedro I would, and I must."

So he slipped slowly around by the outer aisle. He crept quietly up to the altar and softly laid the silver piece upon the very edge.

And listen! What do you think was heard? The bells, the bells!

Oh, how happy the people were! And how happy Little Brother was! He ran out of the church and down the road toward the farm.

Pedro had warmed the dog and fed it, and was now on the way to the city. He hoped that he might see the people come out of the church.

Down the road Little Brother came running. Throwing himself into Pedro's arms, he cried, "Oh, Pedro, Pedro! The bells, the bells! I wish you could have heard them; and they rang when I laid your gift on the altar."

"I did hear them, Little Brother," said Pedro. "Their sound came to me over the snow, – the sweetest music I ever heard."

Long years after, when Pedro grew to be a man, he was a great musician. Many, many people came to hear him play.

Someone said to him one day, "How can you play so sweetly? I never heard such music before."

"Ah," said Pedro, "but you never heard the Christmas bells as I heard them that Christmas night years and years ago."

APPENDIX 2
ADAPTED TEXT OF THE STORY
THE CHRISTMAS BELLS

[1]Thiên thần	Long, long ago, in a far away city, there was a large church. The tower of this church was so high that it seemed to touch the clouds, and in the high tower there were three wonderful bells. When they rang, they made sweet music.

There was something strange about these bells. They were never heard to ring except on Christmas Eve, and no one knew who rang them. Some people thought it was the wind blowing through the tower. Others thought the [1]***angels*** rang them when a gift pleased the Christ Child.

Although the people did not know what rang the bells, they loved to hear them. They would come from miles around to listen to the wonderful music. When they had heard the bells, they would go out of the church, silent but happy. Then all would go back to their homes feeling that Christmas had come, indeed.

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Christmas was near at hand again, and everyone was happy.

Not far from the city two little brothers lived on a farm—Pedro and Little Brother.

Their father was poor and had no gift to lay on the altar. But Pedro had saved all his earnings, and he had one shining silver piece. His father had promised the little boys that they might go to the church on Christmas Eve and take the gift. |
| [2]Tiếng rên rỉ | It was quite dark when the lads started on their way to the city. The snow was falling fast, but they buttoned their little jackets close about them and walked along (*briskly*) **quickly**. They were not far from the church when they heard a low [2]***whine*** of distress. Little Brother, (*clinging*) **sticking** to Pedro in fear, cried, "What is it, Pedro, what is it?"

Pedro ran across the street, and there under a small (*heap*) **pile** of snow, what do you think he found? A little black and white dog, (*shivering*) **shaking** with cold, and nearly starved. Pedro opened his jacket, and put the dog inside to keep it warm.

"You will have to go to the church alone, Little Brother," Pedro said. "I must take this little dog back to the farm, and |

give it food, else it will die."

"But I don't want to go alone, Pedro," said Little Brother.

"Won't you please go and put my gift on the altar, Little Brother? I wish so much to have it there tonight."

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When Little Brother went into the church, all the people were seated. They sat quietly hoping that at last the bells would ring again as in the days of old.

[3]Vang lên

The organ [3]***pealed*** out a Christmas (*hymn*) **song**. The (*choir*) **singing group** and the people (*arose*) **got up**, and all sang the grand old (*anthem*) **national song**. Then a [4]***solemn*** voice said, "Bring now your gifts to the altar."

[4]Trang nghiêm

[5]Long trọng

The king (*arose*) **got up** and went forward with [5]***stately*** tread. Bowing before the altar, he laid upon it his golden crown. Then he walked proudly back to his seat. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

Then the queen (*arose*) **got up** and with (*haughty*) **proud** step walked to the front. She took from her neck and wrists her beautiful jewels and laid them upon the altar. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

[6]Thanh gươm

Then the soldiers came marching proudly forward. They took their jeweled [6]***swords*** from their belts and laid them upon the altar. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

Then the rich men came hurrying forward. They counted great sums of gold and laid them in a businesslike way upon the altar. All the people listened, but the bells did not ring.

"Can I go all alone to the front of the church and lay this small gift on the altar?" said Little Brother. "Oh, how can I? How can I?"

Then he said, "But I told Pedro I would, and I must."

[7]Lối đi giữa hai hàng ghế

So he slipped slowly around by the outer [7]***aisle***. He crept quietly up to the altar and softly laid the silver piece upon the very edge.

And listen! What do you think was heard? The bells, the bells!

Oh, how happy the people were! And how happy Little Brother was! He ran out of the church and down the road toward the farm.

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