Educational and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4352
ISSN Online: 3104-4360
CD ISSN: 3104-4379
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.9076

Expanding Lexical Resources Through Incidental Acquisition In High School English Reading Teaching

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How to cite this paper: Zhao, X., & Wen, M. (2026). Expanding Lexical Resources Through Incidental Acquisition in High School English Reading Teaching. Educational and Humanities, 3(3), 9–19. ISSN Print: 3104-4352, ISSN Online: 3104-4360.
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.9076
Published: 2026-06-04

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Abstract

This paper addresses the persistent dilemma in EFL vocabulary teaching: the tension between efficient explicit instruction and sustainable implicit acquisition. Moving beyond merely advocating for incidental acquisition, it proposes a theoretically synthesized, three-phase instructional model that strategically orchestrates explicit and implicit learning. Drawing on theories of comprehensible input and information processing, this model uses textbooks to anchor themes, graded readers to provide contextual variety, and light-touch output tasks to enhance cognitive depth. Crucially, the paper argues that for Chinese learners, the key to effective incidental acquisition lies not in massive input alone, but in structured recycling across thematically linked contexts and output tasks calibrated to manage L1-induced cognitive load. This approach offers a pragmatic pathway to transcend the textbook-bound lexicon, fostering deeper lexical development while engaging learners authentically.

Keywords

Incidental Acquisition; Lexical Resources; Graded Reading

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a cornerstone of language competence, yet effectively expanding learners' lexical repertoire remains a central challenge in teaching English as a foreign language. Barcroft (2015) notes that the acquisition of new vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of language learning, and the sole requirement for such learning is input. Traditional intentional teaching methods often guide students to learn vocabulary through understanding form and meaning. Yet they generally fail to provide sufficient, meaningful language exposure, resulting in learners' inability to apply what they have acquired readily. In contrast, the theory of incidental vocabulary acquisition (Nagy et al., 1985)—whereby learners subconsciously

absorb new words while focused on meaning—offers a promising alternative. This paper argues that a structured integration of the compulsory FLTRP textbooks with the "Bookworm Series" graded readers can create an ideal environment for such acquisition. The following sections will first analyze the main shortcomings in current vocabulary input, then elaborate on a three-phase reading framework designed to address these gaps, and finally discuss the implementation and pedagogical implications of this framework. Thus, the question arises: how can a classroom–extracurricular linkage be established within limited teaching hours to genuinely promote incidental vocabulary acquisition? This is precisely the issue this paper seeks to address.

2. Problem Identification

2.1. Inadequate Input Volume and Low Rate of Recycling

The National English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (2017 Edition) advocates vocabulary expansion through extensive reading and sets specific extracurricular reading targets (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, classroom reality often falls short. The limited core texts in FLTRP textbooks constrain students' overall language input and reduce opportunities for vocabulary to recur in diverse contexts. Thus, students may memorize words for a quiz but fail to retain or recognize them in new settings. Consequently, relying solely on textbook input has become a major bottleneck in achieving the curricular goal of vocabulary growth.

2.2. Neglect of the Incidental Acquisition Mechanism

According to current pedagogy, it over-relies on explicit, intentional instruction, treating vocabulary as discrete items to be memorized. As highlighted in the comprehensive review, scholarly focus remains predominantly on explicit teaching methods and strategies, such as direct explanation, morphological analysis, and mnemonic techniques, with an emphasis on systematic and rule-based instruction (Huang Le-ping and Shu Yue, 2020). This approach largely ignores the powerful, evidence-backed mechanism of incidental acquisition, where vocabulary is "picked up" subconsciously when learners are engaged in understanding messages by failing to provide sustained, engaging, and level-appropriate (i+1) reading material—the very fuel for incidental learning—the classroom misses a crucial avenue for lexical growth.

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3. Problem Solutions

Finally, complete content and organizational editing before formatting. Please take note of the following items when proofreading spelling and grammar: To address the issues identified, this study applies the concept of incidental vocabulary acquisition. This study provides a three-phase instructional model. Using reading instruction as the main method, it begins with the required textbook as the anchor and extends into graded reading at the right level for students. Through focused tasks, it encourages students to meet and use important words repeatedly in various contexts, aiming to increase their lexical. range.

3.1. Theoretical Rationale

This study's pedagogical framework integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives that explain how vocabulary is acquired, retained, and made usable from the cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions.

3.1.1. Memory Consolidation through Rehearsal Lies the Cognitive Foundation

Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968) proposed a systematic and comprehensive model of information processing, known as the three-stage memory model: sensory memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory. To convert short-term memory into long-term retention, information must be encoded or processed. They argued that the primary mechanism for transferring information from short-term to long-term memory is rehearsal, and that longer rehearsal time leads to more durable retention (Zhou Daoming, 2008).

3.1.2. Acquisition through Comprehensible Input provides the Linguistic Condition

Krashen's (1988) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis specifies the optimal linguistic environment for acquisition to occur. It states that language is acquired subconsciously when learners understand messages containing structures "a little beyond" (i+1) their current competence. This theory justifies the selection of graded "Bookworm Series" readers as the primary extensive reading material, ensuring a steady stream of accessible yet slightly challenging input that facilitates incidental vocabulary encounters.

3.1.3. Deepening Learning through Cognitive Engagement Works as the Pedagogical Catalyst

Laufer & Hulstijn's (2001) Involvement Load Hypothesis explains how the quality of cognitive processing during a task determines retention. It argues that tasks inducing higher involvement load led to more robust learning through the process of need, search, and evaluation. This theory informs the design of light-touch output tasks (e.g., writing, discussions) in the framework, which are strategically employed to elevate learners' cognitive engagement with incidentally encountered words, thereby strengthening memory traces.

Together, these theories chart a coherent pathway for vocabulary development. The Comprehensible Input Hypothesis ensures the initial exposure to new words in a viable linguistic context. The Information-Processing Model underscores the necessity of repeated rehearsal, achieved through structured recycling in reading, to initiate the transfer from short-term to long-term memory. Finally, the Involvement Load Hypothesis provides the mechanism to deepen and accelerate this consolidation through active, generative use. Consequently, this three-phase instructional model is not merely a set of activities, but a theory-driven procedure. It is designed to transform comprehensible input into consolidated, usable lexical knowledge by fulfilling the essential cognitive and linguistic conditions for acquisition.

3.2. Phase 1: Textbook as Thematic and Lexical Anchor

The FLTRP "New Standard English" textbook series for senior high schools is widely used in Sichuan Province. Its content design effectively facilitates students' incidental vocabulary acquisition. Compiled in strict accordance with the "General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards," the textbooks aim to develop students' language proficiency while fostering their core competencies (Zhang Yan, 2022). Each unit follows the cognitive sequence of "Understanding — Developing — Applying," with core vocabulary primarily concentrated in the two main reading sections: "Understanding ideas" and "Developing ideas."

In terms of material selection, the textbooks comprehensively cover the three overarching thematic areas: "Man and Self," "Man and Nature," and "Man and Society," ensuring broad thematic scope. The texts within each unit are closely centered around a core concept, providing students with an in-depth thematic context for exploration. Furthermore, the textbooks employ a diverse range of genres, encompassing expository, narrative, and argumentative texts, thus offering students rich exposure to language serving different functions.

The table below summarizes the thematic areas and core vocabulary features of each unit in FLTRP Compulsory Book 1, which can serve as a basis for further analysis.

Table 1. The thematic areas and core vocabulary features of each unit in FLTRP Compulsory

Book 1

Unit	Unit Title	Section	Text Title	Thematic Contexts	Key Vocabulary Count
1	A new start	Understanding Ideas	My First Day at Senior High	Man and Self (School Life)	18
1	A new start	Developing Ideas	High School Hints	Man and self (Learning Adaptation)	19
2	Exploring English	Understanding Ideas	Neither Pine nor Apple in Pineapple	Man and Society (Language & Culture)	22
2	Exploring English	Developing Ideas	Misadventures in English	Man and Society (Language Misunderstanding)	20
3	Family matters	Understanding Ideas	Like Father, Like Son	Man and Society (Family Relationships)	18
3	Family matters	Developing Ideas	Just a Brother	Man and society (Family & Competition)	30
4	Friends forever	Understanding Ideas	Click for a Friend?	Man and Society (Friendship & Internet)	22
4	Friends forever	Developing Ideas	After Twenty Years (excerpts)	Man and Society (Friendship & Loyalty)	20
5	Into the wild	Understanding Ideas	The Monarch's Journey	Man and Nature (Animal Migration)	18
5	Into the wild	Developing Ideas	An Encounter with Nature	Man and nature (Human-Animal Interaction)	19
6	At one with nature	Understanding Ideas	Longji Rice Terraces	Man and nature (Harmony with Nature)	20
6	At one with nature	Developing Ideas	A Love of Gardening	Man and nature (Gardening & Life)	17
				Total words:	243

This table clearly presents the unit themes, article topics, and the number of core vocabulary items covered in each article. The statistical data show that Book 1 contains a total of 286 core vocabulary items. Among these, the reading passages alone cover 243 core vocabulary entries, accounting for as high as 84.9%. At the same time, the themes of the reading passages are highly diverse, with two passages provided for each unit. These passages comprehensively cover the three thematic areas outlined in the new curriculum standards: "Man and Nature," "Man and Self," and "Man and Society." This demonstrates that, in reading instruction, reading passages serve as the primary source for students to acquire and expand vocabulary. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is also most likely to occur during this process.

This approach requires the teacher to explicitly introduce core thematic vocabulary within a contextualized reading framework. For instance, when teaching the "Developing Ideas" section of Unit 4 Friends Forever in the FLTRP Book 1, the instructor introduces the form, meaning, and usage (Thornbury, Scott, 1950) of 15 high-frequency theme-related words, and designs both controlled and free practice activities. This stage serves to provide a "cognitive anchor" through familiar lexical items and to build students' confidence before they engage in extensive reading. By the end of this phase, learners can establish an initial form-meaning connection for the target vocabulary within a structured context.

3.3. Phase 2: "Bookworm Series" as the Extensive Reading Engine

Headings, or heads, are organizational devices that guide the reader through your paper. There are two types: component heads and text heads.

Component heads identify the different components of your paper and are not topically subordinate to each other. Examples include Acknowledgements and

References and, for these, the correct style to use is “Heading 5”. Use “figure caption” for your Figure captions, and “table head” for your table title. Run-in heads, such as “Abstract”, will require you to apply a style (in this case, non-italic) in addition to the style provided by the drop-down menu to differentiate the head from the text.

Text heads organize the topics on a relational, hierarchical basis. For example, the paper title is the primary text head because all subsequent material relates and elaborates on this one topic. If there are two or more sub-topics, the next level head should be used and, conversely, if there are not at least two sub-topics, then no subheads should be introduced. Styles named “Heading 1”, “Heading 2”, “Heading 3”, and “Heading 4” are prescribed.

incidental acquisition.

“The Bookworm Oxford Chinese-English Bilingual Series” is an ideal resource to operationalize this principle. Co-published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Oxford University Press, its design philosophy aligns with facilitating natural language acquisition through engaging, abridged literary classics (Gu Feng, 2022). Crucially, its scientific seven-level grading system ensures the input is comprehensible (i+1), while its wide array of titles across genres and stories naturally supplies the contextual variability necessary for deep lexical learning. The series’ supportive features—such as controlled vocabulary, bilingual texts, and annotations—further reduce cognitive load, allowing learner attention to remain on meaning-driven comprehension, the very condition for incidental learning to occur.

The table below illustrates the correspondence for senior high school levels of “The Bookworm Oxford Chinese-English Bilingual Series” and Lexile Measures. (Wang Pei, 2012)

Table 2. Level of The Bookworm Oxford Chinese-English Bilingual Series

Level of The Bookworm Oxford Chinese-English Bilingual Series	Lexile Measure	The Lexical Resource of each level
Level 3	500L-850L	1000-word vocabulary size, suitable for students in Grade 9 and Grade 10
Level 4	650L-950L	1500-word vocabulary size, suitable for students in Grade 10 and Grade 11
Level 5	800L-1200L	2000-word vocabulary size, suitable for students in Grade 11 and Grade 12

The efficacy of using graded readers for vocabulary expansion is strongly supported by the Contextual Variability Hypothesis. Research indicates that encountering new words in diverse contexts is superior to repeated exposure in the same context for robust vocabulary learning, a finding consistent across both first (Bolger et al., 2008) and second languages (Lauro et al., 2020). This advantage stems from varied contexts prompting learners to abstract and refine a word’s core meaning. Therefore, a successful extensive reading program must provide not only comprehensible input but also systematic variation in textual contexts to optimize.

The structured progression of the series, as evidenced by its alignment with standardized Lexile measures for senior high school levels (Wang Pei, 2012), enables a seamless “layered” expansion. Teachers can anchor instruction in a

textbook unit theme and then select multiple “Bookworm” books at appropriate levels that revolve around related themes. This practice creates the intended “textual network.” Within it, core vocabulary is not merely repeated, but dynamically re-encountered and reinforced across changing narrative and situational contexts. This process drives vocabulary growth from passive recognition toward active mastery.

In teaching practice, it is not only a widely popular extracurricular resource but can also be effectively integrated into classroom instruction through systematic teaching models, such as the “three-dimensional driven” approach, to enhance students’ language proficiency and core competencies (Pan Lin, 2019). The upgraded edition launched in 2022 further refines exercise design and digital resources, continuing to serve English language education (Gu Feng, 2022).

The table below analyses the connection and the feasibility between the Secret Garden from the Bookworm system and the reading material “A Love of Gardening” from Unit 6, the FLTRP “New Standard English” Book 1, through its theme, the vocabulary level of difficulty, and the new word’s rate.

Table 3. The analysis of the connection and the feasibility between the Secret Garden from the Bookworm system and the reading material

Dimension	Feasibility	Key Evidence & Data
Thematic Anchoring	Very High	The reader is a complete narrative representation of the textbook theme "A Love of Gardening", with a plot that directly corresponds to the theme, enabling seamless integration.
Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition	High	Core textbook vocabulary is highly recurrent in the story, and over 30+ related thematic words (e.g., dig, secret, heal) are naturally introduced in context, creating an ideal "learning-in-use" scenario.
Language Difficulty Match	Well-Matched	The reader's language level (Bookworm Level 3, ~1,000 headwords, Lexile 500L-850L) is slightly below, or on par with the textbook (Compulsory Book 1, ~1,500-2,000 words), and the new words' rate is about 3%, ensuring strong readability.

To conclude, the feasibility of integration is high, making it a quality solution for promoting incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Thus, by providing massive, comprehensible, and engaging input, graded reading serves as the essential engine for vocabulary expansion. Its core function is dual: it consolidates initially learned vocabulary through rich, repetitive contexts, while simultaneously creating the conditions for the incidental picking up of new, glossed lexical items within a meaningful story. This mechanism is precisely how a well-structured “layered” reading program achieves the goal of widening students’ lexical resources.

3.4. Phase 2: “Bookworm Series” as the Extensive Reading Engine

While incidental acquisition is an effective means of expanding lexical resources, it has inherent limitations: the process is stochastic, time-consuming, and often results in shallow word knowledge (Schmitt, 2010). For learners with Chinese as their first language, processing English orthography and syntax imposes an additional

cognitive load. Therefore, blindly applying output tasks that emphasize free generation can be inefficient. This approach is often favored in Western studies. (Li & Lei, 2021). Thus, the third phase of this model aims not only to increase language output but also to implement cognitive calibration. It designs tasks to fine-tune the "involvement load," thereby promoting deep processing while avoiding cognitive overload caused by difficult word-form retrieval.

3.4.1. Design Rationale: The Application of the Involvement Load Hypothesis Based on Meta-Evidence

The meta-analysis by Li Xin and Lei Lei (2021) provides critical design guidelines. It found that for Chinese learners, sentence-making and fill-in-the-blank tasks yielded similar effects. This is because during free sentence construction, learners must allocate significant cognitive resources to word-form search and syntactic encoding, which encroaches on the cognitive space available for deepening semantic processing. This finding necessitates a contextualized adaptation of Laufer & Hulstijn's (2001) classic hypothesis: in the Chinese senior high school EFL classroom, optimizing the design of the "evaluation" and "need" dimensions, while carefully managing the difficulty of the "search" dimension, is key to enhancing task efficiency.

3.4.2. Tiered Task Design: An Operational Three-Tier Model

Based on the above rationale, the research proposes a three-tier output task framework closely integrated with Bookworm series and textbook themes, aiming to provide learners of different proficiency levels with precisely calibrated "cognitive scaffolding."

Table 4. Table type styles (Table caption is indispensable).

Level	Task & Example	Purpose
1 High Support	Cloze with Word Bank Fill in: "The _____ garden began to _____ her heart." Words: secret, heal	Link Form & Meaning Focus on picking the right word for the context.
2 Medium Support	Combine Sentences Combine: "The garden was neglected. It held a secret." Use: although	Use Grammar & Meaning Practice to use words correctly in a new sentence.
3 Low Support	Answer with Prompts Question: How did Colin change? Use words like: hope, strength	Express Ideas: Use words to share your own thoughts about the story.

3.4.3. Implementation and Assessment: Integrating Process-Oriented Evaluation

To be effective, these "light-touch" tasks must be embedded seamlessly within the ongoing reading process rather than treated as separate summative assessments. This integration can be achieved through several practical strategies that emphasize continuous feedback and development.

One key strategy is the use of digital learning logs, where students submit their responses to cloze or sentence synthesis exercises online. This platform allows for immediate, automated, or teacher-guided feedback, reinforcing correct usage and addressing errors in real time.

Furthermore, structured peer review sessions can be implemented within small groups. During these sessions, students evaluate each other's theme-prompted written responses using a simple, focused rubric—asking, for instance, whether word choices are accurate and sentences are coherent. This collaborative exercise not only deepens their own analytical engagement with the language but also cultivates a community of practice.

Finally, compiling a mini-portfolio of a student's work across all three task tiers within a single thematic unit provides a powerful tool for teachers and learners alike. This portfolio visually traces the individual's developmental trajectory in lexical application, showcasing progress from supported to more autonomous use.

Collectively, this refined, tiered approach to task design ensures systematic guidance for incidentally encountered vocabulary. It guides vocabulary through a process of cognitive deepening. This process moves from initial recognition to comprehension, and then to initial active use. By operating within a low-anxiety, high-support framework, the model effectively bridges the persistent gap between receptive knowledge and productive ability.

To conclude, this section proposes a streamlined, three-phase pedagogical framework designed to systematically channel students from sole compulsory textbook learning into sustained, pleasure-driven, graded reading using the "Bookworm" series. The primary goal is to create a self-reinforcing cycle where intentional vocabulary acquisition from the textbook fuels successful comprehension in extensive reading, which in turn drives incidental vocabulary acquisition.

4. Discussion: Navigating Tensions and Practical Constraints

The three-phase model offers a viable theoretical and practical framework for vocabulary development. Nevertheless, its transition from principle to practice requires prudent implementation, which involves a careful consideration of the underlying tensions and contextual constraints. Primary among these is the balance between efficiency and depth.

4.1. Tension between Efficiency and Depth

Explicit vocabulary processing strategies significantly outperform implicit strategies, as demonstrated by the study (Jing Jing, 2018) involving thirty Chinese-speaking learners of English in tasks of new word extraction, think-aloud protocols, and retention tests. The model addresses this by employing explicit instruction to initiate the implicit learning process. It explicitly teaches core theme words to

ensure smoother and more successful extensive reading. This in turn creates the conditions for deeper language acquisition to occur.

4.2. Practical Constraints and Adaptations

Teacher workload is a valid concern. The model's sustainability hinges on collegial resource-sharing (e.g., building a school-wide "Theme-Reader Match" database) and leveraging technology (e.g., using digital platforms for reading logs and lightweight peer feedback on output tasks). Ultimately, by streamlining administrative tasks, these strategies free up valuable teacher time for more impactful activities like individualized instruction and deeper student engagement.

4.3. Assessment Alignment

The model's success in fostering lexical richness may not be fully captured by discrete-point vocabulary tests. Educators are encouraged to incorporate portfolio assessments (e.g., collections of writing samples that show lexical growth) and self-reflection journals to capture the qualitative dimension of learning.

Acknowledging these challenges does not undermine the model; instead, it provides a realistic roadmap for implementation and frames the model not as a panacea, but as a principled compass for navigating the complex terrain of vocabulary development.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study proposes a vocabulary teaching model that integrates explicit classroom instruction with implicit learning through extensive reading, structured around textbooks as anchors, driven by tasks, and extended through graded readers. This approach not only effectively facilitates students' incidental vocabulary acquisition in authentic contexts but also enhances the engagement and sustainability of the learning process according to Zhang et al (2022). Furthermore, it offers a practical pathway to balance curriculum requirements with students' autonomous learning motivation. Looking ahead, this model still requires further validation and refinement. Meanwhile, future research should expand into vocabulary acquisition in multimodal contexts such as listening and writing, thus promoting the integrated development of students' language competencies in a more comprehensive manner.

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