FAQs about Building Your Vocabulary
(FAQ = Frequently Asked Questions)

Q: I can't remember new words after I look them up in my English-English dictionary. What can I do to improve my memory?

A: To learn a word, you need to use it.

i. If you say and write the word, you can develop your muscle memories. Your mouth will remember the word, you will hear the word, and your hand will remember the word. These three memories will help you learn and remember the word.

ii. There are many ways to strengthen your auditory (hearing) memory. An easy way to do this is to speak/record the word on your phone. Then, listen to your recording each day for 7 days.

iii. You can also use the word in a sentence that is meaningful to you. Then, record yourself saying the sentence in your phone. Listen to your recording each day for 5 days. On the first day, if you don’t like the recording, re-record your sentence. Repeat as necessary.

Example: scold
Your sentence: Last night, my son pulled the cat’s tail so I scolded him for his bad behavior. I said, “You must not pull the cat’s tail!”

Q: My teacher tells me not to write translations of words while I’m reading. Why is it a bad idea to write translations next to new words?

A: Your brain is very smart. As soon as you look at or write the word in your own language, the English word will be invisible. Your brain won’t see it anymore.

i. When you look up a word in your bilingual dictionary, if the word is a synonym of a word you already know in English, write the English word instead of the translation.

Example:

In your English dictionary, you look up enormous, and when you see the definition, it says very big. Write very big above the word enormous in your book.

Sometimes, you may have to use your bilingual dictionary. In this case, the translation of enormous will probably help you realize that it’s like the word big in English. Write big above the word enormous instead of translating it to your language.

ii. If you want to write a translation, write it on a different page or on a sticky note or on an index card that you use as a bookmark.
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Q: My teacher says I shouldn’t look up every new word when I read. How can I increase my vocabulary if I don’t look up the new words?

A: You can increase your vocabulary and improve your reading skills without a dictionary if you read interesting things at your reading level. If the reading is at your level, you will automatically learn new vocabulary. To learn how you can determine whether a reading is the right level for you, see the handout on this website, “Calculate Your Reading Level.”

Q: How many words should I look up on each page?

A: Generally, restrict yourself to looking up no more than three words on each page. In the beginning, you might choose the wrong three words to look up. But, over time, you will become a better judge of which words to look up.

Q: How many new words should I try to learn when I do my reading assignment?

A: The number of words you should learn depends on your purpose for reading.

When you are reading to learn information and concepts for your college classes, you may have to learn many new words. You are responsible for knowing the vocabulary related to key concepts and information.

However, when you are reading for pleasure (e.g. the news or a story), try to guess the main points of the text. It is a waste of your time to look up unfamiliar words if you can understand the reading without them and/or probably won’t use them. The bold words in the excerpt below are a good example.

The day little Jim died was the saddest day that year. People gathered on the veranda before the funeral procession to express their condolences to the family. The bouquets of flowers – hyacinths and roses, lilies and carnations – sent a sickening odor into the somber surroundings.

If you know the words die, sad, sick and funeral, you can understand the reading. Even if you don’t know the words gather, veranda and condolences, in the second sentence, you can guess that people went somewhere to tell the family of the dead child (“little Jim”) that they were sad too. If you have been to a funeral, you can also guess the meaning of the words in the third sentence.
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Q: Should I stop reading in my own language?
A: We read to increase our knowledge, so it’s important that you continue to read in your own language. In this way, you can continue learning about the world. In your own language, you can read efficiently and with pleasure (if you enjoy reading). However, to increase your general knowledge, it is important that you read broadly. If you usually read only novels in your own language, push yourself to also read the news (non-fiction). Also try to read about new things. If you love to read about fashion, you could read about auto mechanics and gerontology.

Q: Should I use an English-English dictionary or a bilingual dictionary?
A: Always check your English-English dictionary first. If you use your bilingual dictionary, and you discover that you already know an English synonym of the word, write the English word, not the translation. For example, you look up the word emerge in your bilingual dictionary. When you see the word in your own language, you say to yourself, “That means to come out.” So, you can write, “to come out,” on your text.

If you do need the translation, write it on a different page or on a sticky note.

Q: I’ve heard that I should read and listen at the same time to learn new words. Where can I do this?
A: You can read and listen at the same time in CLAD! You can also check out books with CDs from the Read Collection in the Rosenberg Library (5th floor).

Q: What is my ideal reading level for improving my reading skills and building vocabulary?
A: You should understand 95-98% of the words and the text should be personally interesting to you. If the concepts are too difficult, ask someone for help.

Q: Can someone calculate my reading level for me?
A: Only you can calculate your reading level.

Q: How can I calculate my reading level?
A: Look for the handout on this website called “Calculate Your Reading Level.” It tells you how to determine whether your vocabulary is large enough for you to understand the material you are reading.
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Q: Can a librarian tell me which books would be good for me?
A: No. But you can show the librarian a book that you know is your reading level. You can say, “This book is my reading level, but I need to write a paper about the negative consequences of global warming. Can you show me a book on global warming that is about the same reading level?” The librarian will be able to help.

Q: What should I do if the books in my ESL class are too difficult for me?
A: Here are a number of things you can do:

i. Using the handout, “Calculate Your Reading Level,” determine what percentage of the vocabulary you understand in your ESL text, and tell your teacher.

ii. Keep reading. Many students say that after they have been reading a book for a while, it gets easier. This is because they “get used to” the author and also because many new words are repeated again and again.

iii. Make an appointment in CLAD to work with a reading tutor.

Q: What should I do if my ESL class textbooks are too easy for me?
A: Go to the library and find more challenging texts so that you can keep improving your reading skills and vocabulary.

Q: What should I do if textbooks in my non-ESL classes are too difficult for me?
A: Talk to your instructor during her office hours. Tell her that the text is difficult because your English vocabulary is limited. Ask whether she has some tips to help you with reading assignments.