



Should I Use My Dictionary
While I Read?

You have just sat down to read about how to be a successful ESL student. So far, you are happy because you are already on page 3 and you haven't had to use your dictionary yet. But it is there, right? It is part of every ESL student's anatomy. ESL students seem to have two arms, two legs, and a native language-English dictionary. (Did you look up the word *anatomy*?)

If your dictionary is there, sitting next to you (which I'm sure it is), you need to learn Rule Number 1 about reading: **Do not look up every new word in the dictionary.** Read to get the main idea. Read for fun. Read to be finished. The point is, **read.** Do not read, stop, look up a word, translate, read again, stop, look up a word, translate. If you constantly do this, you may never finish this page (not to mention the book, which is required reading in my class) and reading will become something you

dread (don't look it up; it means “*not like at all*”). So instead of reading and stopping and reading and stopping, try to read whatever it is you are reading ONCE without stopping so that you can get the main idea. Read for the main idea first. Then you can go back and look up the important words that you did not understand. After you understand these words, you can re-read the whole reading, and you will be able to understand more details.

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I know this is difficult to do. I had the same problem when I was learning Spanish. It took me forever to read anything because I was constantly using my Spanish-English dictionary. I remember when I was in college I had to read a novel in Spanish. My professor, Mrs. Beebe,



assigned us a whole chapter (19 pages) to read. I thought I would die! I sat down to read (with my dictionary at my side), and five hours and 27 minutes later, I finished Chapter 1. I had no idea what Chapter 1 was about, but I did have an entire two-page list of new vocabulary words translated into English. It was already about midnight, and I hadn't even started my homework for the rest of my classes. I looked at my little Spanish novel, and I flipped through the pages to discover that it had 23 chapters! I decided to drop the class.

The next day I went to my professor's office in tears. I explained, through sobs, that I was dropping her class because it was too difficult for me. I told her that I had just spent five hours and 27 minutes on Chapter 1, and I didn't even understand what it was about and, because the book had 23 chapters, it would take me 125 hours and 21 minutes to finish it. I simply did not have that much time. I explained that I had four other classes and that although she was a great teacher and I really liked



her, I could not continue with her class. She listened patiently, gave me a Kleenex (that word won't be in the dictionary; figure it out), and talked me into staying in the class for at least a few more days. Four years later, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish.

Over time it will no longer be part of your anatomy, and you will be able to leave the house, go to the store, take the bus, and live your life without bringing your dictionary along.

It does get easier. As you acquire (learn) more language and more vocabulary words, you will be able to read a sentence, a paragraph, and even a chapter without using your dictionary for translation. Over time it will no longer be part of your anatomy, and you will be able to leave the house, go to the store, take the bus, and live your life without bringing your dictionary along.

