

# FLASHCARDS FOR VOCABULARY

Using flashcards to help learn certain vocabulary items has been shown to be an effective tool.\* Flashcards are particularly useful for beginners learning high-frequency vocabulary. They can support or replace learning with gestures (classical TPR).

Using physical paper flashcards is a more flexible, more focused, and more convenient than online “flashcard” apps. Some students have had success creating word decks with apps like Quizlet, but paper flashcards are more effective. When it comes to reading, students read faster and remember twice as much with paper vs. screens. Write the second language (L2) word on one side, and your first language (L1) word on the other side. Here’s how to use flashcards effectively:

- 1) **Connect to content.** Make sets of flashcards that are connected to similar content and themes, like an upcoming reading, time period, location, story, or novella. Completely random sets of words are not as valuable as words you will soon see or hear in context. A mix of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and function words that relate to what you are reading in class) works best, i.e., do not make a list of just 50 fruits, or 50 household items.
- 2) **Select a small set of words.** Studying a limited set of words, around 20 flashcards at a time, is best—15 to 30 can work, but don’t make each set too big. A larger set is often just a distraction. Master that set, and then move on.
- 3) **Start with recognition.** Look at the L2 side and see if you can come up with the L1 word.
- 4) **Focus.** Separate the words you know into three stacks, or put them in a folder or stack with two sections:

- **Got it!** You can say these quickly and confidently. Put these aside for now.
- **Don’t know it yet.** Carry these with you and go through them 5-10 times a day until you get them.

Carry the Don’t know it yet stack with you and look at them 5-10 times a day until you get them down. Keep going over the words in the Don’t know it yet stack until you can honestly put them in the Got it! stack. Then create a new stack of flashcards for a different set of vocabulary. Go back through your flashcard sets often to reinforce the learning and to maintain your vocabulary.

5) **Shuffle.** Shuffle the stacks each time you go through them to mix up the order. You want to be able to recognize words in random order, not just a specific, predictable list.

6) **Repeat.** Several exposures over time are best for learning. As the old Latin saying goes: ***Repetitio mater studiorum est***: Repetition is the mother of learning. Once you have mastered a set (all the words are in the Got it! stack), keep reviewing. Do not stop. Go over them: **A**) several times that first day, **B**) once again later that week, **C**) again after two weeks, and **D**) again within the month. That way, they will be with you longer.

7) **Switch to production.** Once you recognize the words in a stack, switch to producing (saying) the L2 words. Look at the cards in L1 (English) and start working to produce them in L2. Repeat steps 4-6 above.

8) **Variations:** Think about making flashcards in a different way with:

**A) Drawings.** The L2 word on one side and a drawing on the other side. **B) Descriptions.** Write a description of the word in L2 instead of a drawing. **C) Both L1 & L2.** Write both the L1 word and the L2 word or description on the same side of the card. This may be a faster way to review.

But... **Don’t assume too much here.** Learning vocabulary with flashcards is not the same as acquiring those words. For most students, flashcards will only put the words into SHORT-TERM memory. The learning will be temporary. Those words can help students to begin to read for meaning—which can help students to begin to really acquire them. With enough reading and discussion, students will get enough exposure and repetition to acquire the words.

\* SLA researcher **Eric Herman** has explained the value and effectiveness of using flashcards in his [Acquisition Classroom Memo](#), as have **Paul Nation** and **Rob Waring**, in [Teaching Extensive Reading in Another Language](#).

I’ve used flashcards myself to learn more than 300 specialty medical terms in two weeks for medical mission trips.

