

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How important is learning English in your country or region?
- Why is English a global language?
- Do you think English will still be the world's main international language in 100 years?
- Which languages (if any) do you think could replace English as a global language?

2 Key words

a. Write a word in bold from the article next to the correct definition.

1. a large number of people or things arriving at the same time _____
2. easily influenced or likely to be affected by something _____
3. to go back to a previous state or way of doing something _____
4. unfortunate and deserving pity; unlucky _____
5. impossible to understand _____
6. earlier events or decisions that are used as examples for future situations

7. extremely surprising or shocking; astonishing _____
8. informal words or expressions used in everyday conversation _____
9. control or power over an area or people; sovereignty _____
10. talking continuously about unimportant things; chattering _____
11. resistant to change _____
12. to change position, direction or focus; to move _____
13. a language that develops from a mixture of different languages and becomes the main language
of a place _____

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

14. one of the parts that make up something larger _____
15. people who are under the control of a ruler or government _____
16. the movement of people from one place to another to live _____
17. happening faster than usual _____
18. words adopted from one language and used in another without translation

19. unable to read or write _____
20. the quality of being impossible to predict or forecast _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. The ancient manuscripts were completely _____ after centuries of water damage.
2. Educational reforms in the 1940s reduced the number of _____ children from 50 per cent to 15 per cent.
3. Many words such as piano and pizza are _____ from Italian.
4. The _____ set by this court case will influence legal decisions for years to come.
5. A(n) _____ in public opinion about capital punishment means that the death penalty is much less common than it was in the past.
6. Climate change has _____ the melting of polar ice caps in recent decades.
7. The _____ tourist got lost three times in one day despite having a map.
8. The _____ of workers from rural to urban areas has transformed many cities.
9. The British Empire once held _____ over a quarter of the world's population.

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

10. The _____ cost of the railway project forced the government to abandon it halfway through.
11. Young people often use _____ and language that older generations don't understand.
12. A(n) _____ approach to investing focuses on low-risk, stable returns.
13. The _____ spoken in Haiti developed from a mix of French and West African languages.
14. After the software update failed, the system had to _____ its previous version.
15. A(n) _____ of tourists during summer puts enormous strain on local services.
16. Exercise is an important _____ of a healthy lifestyle.
17. Children are particularly _____ to peer pressure during their teenage years.
18. The weather's _____ makes it difficult to plan outdoor events.
19. The Queen's loyal _____ gathered outside the palace to celebrate her Jubilee.
20. Shelby spent the whole afternoon _____ on the phone with her friend about nothing in particular.

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

For the time being it's dominant – but as the Romans could tell you, nothing lasts forever

Laura Spinney

11 May, 2025

- 1 Given that a **staggering** 1,500 languages could vanish by the end of this century, by some estimates – close to a quarter of the world's total – some may find it obscene to even ask this question. English is certainly not on the endangered list. As the one truly global language, it is more often labelled an exterminator, a great dinosaur that crushes **hapless** smaller languages underfoot.
- 2 The fact is, though, that no language has yet proved eternal. **Subjects** of the Roman or Egyptian empires might once have assumed that their languages would last for ever, but they were wrong. Latin and Egyptian were eventually transformed into languages that would have been **unintelligible** to Augustus or Ramses the Great. "English could of course die, just as Egyptian died," says linguist Martin Haspelmath, of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. The more interesting questions are: when and how?
- 3 Predicting the future of any language is, most linguists will tell you, an exercise in speculation. The code by which we communicate is subject to so many complex and interacting forces that – until AI helps find patterns in the data – we can't do much more than guess. It doesn't help that we can't look very far back for **precedents**: humans have been **nattering** for tens if not hundreds of thousands of years, but we only thought of recording our pearls of wisdom about 5,000 years ago, when the Sumerians invented writing. Still, most experts would agree on a few guiding principles. **Migration** is a major driver of language change, as is technology. Some predict that international migration will rise as the climate crisis intensifies, and technological renewal is speeding up, but they aren't the only factors. Widespread literacy and schooling – both only a few hundred years old – act as brakes on linguistic evolution, by imposing common standards.
- 4 As if that wasn't unhelpful enough, experts judge that the linguistic landscape is terribly **susceptible** to black swan events – those defined by their **unpredictability**. The Egyptian language survived the arrival of the Greeks, the Romans and Christianity, but not that of Arabic and Islam in the seventh century AD. No one quite knows why.
- 5 We're in uncharted territory, in other words. English could come under pressure as a global lingua franca if China replaces the US as the world's dominant superpower, and if India drops English as an official language. Demographic factors could drive the growth of African lingua francas – Lingala and Swahili, for example, but also other languages such as French and Portuguese – and of Spanish in the Americas, without any major war. "A hundred years from now, the world could be very different," Haspelmath says.
- 6 But English will still be spoken in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, in all likelihood. And we have to distinguish between two phenomena: the resizing of English's **dominion**, and its own evolution. English exists today in many spoken variants, just as Latin did before it exploded into Romance. Those variants are being held together by a common written form and the internet – forces that were absent in the late Roman empire, most of whose subjects were **illiterate** – so English is unlikely to go the way of Latin.
- 7 On the other hand, the balance of power between the variants is likely to **shift**, so that it's no longer American- or British-English speakers setting the standards. West African Pidgin, a **creole** strongly influenced by English, was spoken by a few thousand people two centuries ago, but it's now the dominant language of west Africa, and linguist Kofi Yakpo of the University of Hong Kong predicts that by 2100 it will have 400 million speakers. It's mostly a spoken language, so Pidgin speakers **revert to** English when they write. "It's very clear that in half a century we'll have more books written [in English] by Nigerians or Indians than by UK residents," Yakpo says.
- 8 That means that Nigerian and Indian **colloquialisms** will start entering "standard" English. The vocabulary of a language – its words – tends to be its fastest evolving **component**. Sounds, accents and grammar are typically more **conservative**, but change in them is needed to make a language unintelligible to its original speakers – to turn it into a new language, that is. So even though New Yorkers and Londoners might be calling liquor or booze by the Pidgin word for it, 'ogogoru', within 50 years – they will still probably be speaking Englishes that today's Londoners and New Yorkers could understand.

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

- 9 As for the combined impact of migration and technology on the nature of English, that's harder to anticipate. Although the language has never stood still, the growing **influx** of non-native English speakers to English-speaking strongholds such as Britain and North America could usher in a period of **accelerated** change, leading to a new language in need of a new name: post-modern English? But if machine translation is taken up on a massive scale, both the residents and the immigrants could be relieved of the pressure to learn each other's languages. At the very least, this technology might stem the flow of **loanwords** between languages – countering the effect of migration, once again.
- 10 The point is that even if we can't predict *how* English will change, we can be sure that it will, and that not even the world's first – and for now, only – global language is immune from extinction. Both Latin and Egyptian were spoken for more than 2,000 years; English has been going strong for about 1,500. It's looking healthy now, some might even say too healthy, but its days could yet be numbered.

© Guardian News and Media 2025
First published in *The Guardian*, 11/05/2025

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and decide if the following statements are True, False or Not Mentioned.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. The Roman Empire actively tried to preserve Latin as an eternal language. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 2. The Sumerians developed the first writing system approximately 5,000 years ago. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 3. Climate change is expected to increase international migration patterns. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 4. The Egyptian language disappeared because of military conquest by Arabic forces. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 5. English has been a major language for a longer period than Latin was. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 6. West African Pidgin currently has more speakers than British English. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 7. Nigerian and Indian English speakers will soon outnumber British authors in English-language publishing. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 8. Grammar and pronunciation change more slowly than vocabulary in language evolution. | True / False / Not Mentioned |

4 Key language

a. Find these phrases in the article. Then match them to the correct definition.

common standards
guiding principles

lingua franca
pearls of wisdom

stem the flow
unchartered territory

- to reduce or stop the movement or spread of something _____
- an unfamiliar situation where there are no established rules or previous examples to follow

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

3. a language used for communication between people who don't share a native language

4. agreed rules or levels of quality that everyone follows or accepts _____

5. valuable insights or pieces of advice, often said ironically _____

6. fundamental rules or beliefs that help direct decisions and behaviour

b. Complete the sentences with the correct form of the expressions from the previous activity.

1. The new CEO was navigating _____ as the company had never dealt with this type of crisis before.

2. English has served as the _____ in international business for several decades.

3. The government introduced new policies to _____ of illegal imports into the country.

4. Universities must maintain _____ across all campuses to ensure degrees have equal value.

5. My grandmother loves sharing her _____ about life, though we've heard most of her stories before.

6. The company's _____ include putting customer safety first and maintaining open communication.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How would you feel if English gradually lost its dominance as a global language over the next century? Would this affect your personal, academic or professional life?
- The article suggests that unpredictable 'black swan events' can dramatically change the fate of languages. Can you think of any recent global events that might accelerate or slow down English's global status?

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 3: Advanced

- Should countries try to preserve their local languages against the spread of English, or should they embrace English as a means of global communication? Why or why not?

6 In your own words

- a. Work in small groups to create dictionary entries showing how English might look in 100 years. Follow the steps below.

Step 1: Brainstorm categories. Consider where new words might come from:

Technology: AI, virtual reality, space travel

Climate/Environment: New weather phenomena, extinct/new species

Geopolitics: Rising influence of Nigeria, India, China; African lingua francas

Social change: New jobs, relationships, lifestyle concepts

Hybrid languages: English mixed with Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, Swahili

Step 2: Create your entries.

- a. Produce six dictionary entries in total:
- three completely new words / loanwords from other languages
 - three current words marked as 'old' / 'no longer used'

You may like to use the following dictionary format:

ogogoru (noun)

Origin: West African Pidgin, entered standard English around 2075

Definition: any alcoholic beverage; replaced older terms 'alcohol' and 'booze'

Example: *Let's get some ogogoru after work.*

Usage note: Formal and informal contexts

- b. Present your dictionary entries to your classmates. Then decide as a class which words you think are most likely to be in use in English in 100 years.