

The big idea: could the English language die?

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- How important is learning English in your country or region, and why?
- 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. affected or changed by someone or something _____
2. continues to exist or happen for a period of time _____
3. stops doing or using something _____
4. the best or the most important _____
5. to have the most power or control over something _____
6. calculated or guessed approximately _____
7. people who study languages and how they work _____
8. defeats or destroys someone or something completely and easily _____
9. the arrival of large numbers of people or things _____
10. changed completely in appearance, form or character _____
11. says what will happen in the future based on knowledge or evidence _____
12. the effect or influence that something has on a person or situation _____

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

1. Many young people _____ social media when they realise it can affect their mental health.
2. The _____ of tourists during summer completely changes the atmosphere of our small town.

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Level 2: Intermediate

3. Technology has _____ the way we communicate with each other over the past twenty years.
4. I _____ that more and more people will become vegetarians in the future.
5. Tech companies _____ all other industries in the area of Silicon Valley in California.
6. My music taste has been strongly _____ by the songs my parents played when I was growing up.
7. Angela easily _____ her opponents in tennis matches because she trains six hours every day.
8. It's _____ that over two billion people worldwide use English as a second language.
9. The _____ of climate change on polar bears has been devastating for their population.
10. _____ have discovered that babies can distinguish between different language sounds from birth.
11. A good quality mattress usually _____ about eight to ten years with proper care.
12. Kiera graduated from one of the _____ universities in the country and got a great job.

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Level 2: Intermediate

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

Laura Spinney
11 May, 2025

- 1 It is **estimated** that about 1,500 languages could disappear by the end of this century (almost a quarter of the world's total), but English is certainly not on the endangered list. As a global language, it is often called 'a great dinosaur' that **crushes** smaller languages to death.
- 2 The fact is, though, that no language **lasts** forever. Romans or Egyptians might have believed that their languages would survive, but they were wrong. Latin and Egyptian were eventually **transformed** into languages that would have been impossible for Emperor Augustus or Ramses the Great to understand. "English could die, just as Egyptian died," says linguist Martin Haspelmath, of the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig, Germany. The more interesting questions are: when and how?
- 3 Understanding the future of any language is, most **linguists** will tell you, very difficult. It doesn't help that we can't look very far back for examples of how people spoke: humans have been talking for thousands of years, but we only started recording our languages about 5,000 years ago, when the Sumerians invented writing. However, most experts agree on a few things. Migration causes language change, as does technology. Literacy and school education – both only a few hundred years old – slow down changes in languages by using common standards.
- 4 English could also come under pressure as a global lingua franca if China replaces the US as the world's **top** superpower, and if India **drops** English as an official language. But English will still be spoken in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. However, the different varieties of English are likely to change, so that it's no longer American- or British-English speakers who will **dominate**. West African Pidgin, a language **influenced** by English, was spoken by a few thousand people two centuries ago, but it's now the dominant language of west Africa. Kofi Yakpo of the University of Hong Kong **predicts** that by 2100 it will have 400 million speakers. That means that Nigerian words will probably start entering "standard" English.
- 5 The **impact** of migration and technology on the nature of English, is more difficult to predict. The growing **influx** of non-native English speakers to English-speaking countries such as Britain and North America could lead to a new language. But if AI tools and technology are used to translate languages, people won't need to learn each other's languages.
- 6 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 won't disappear. Both Latin and Egyptian were spoken for more than 2,000 years; English has been spoken for about 1,500. It's looking healthy now, some might even say too healthy, but its days could be numbered.

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3 Comprehension check

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

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1. The Romans tried to stop Latin from disappearing as a language. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 2. The Sumerians developed the first writing system approximately 5,000 years ago. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 3. English has been a major language for a longer period than Latin was. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 4. West African Pidgin currently has more speakers than British English. | True / False / Not Mentioned |
| 5. Migration and technology are unlikely to cause languages to change. | True / False / Not Mentioned |

4 Key language

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

common standards
lingua franca

days could be numbered
the endangered list

under pressure

- an official record or category of species (animals, plants or languages) that are at risk of disappearing or becoming extinct _____
- used to say that something's time is limited or running out _____
- a language used for communication between people who don't share a common language _____
- agreed rules or levels of quality that everyone follows or accepts _____
- in a situation where you must deal with problems that could cause you to feel stressed. _____

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

1. With so many people shopping online, traditional bookshops' _____.
2. English has served as the _____ in international business for several decades.
3. The giant panda was on _____ for many years, but conservation efforts have helped increase its population.
4. The company is _____ to reduce costs because sales have been falling for six months.
5. Schools across the country use _____ for English grammar so that all students learn in the same way.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How would you feel if English stopped being a global language over the next 100 years? In what ways would this affect you?
- Should countries try to protect their local languages from English, or should they accept that English is important for international 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

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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'
- 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.