

## Children's vocabulary shrinking as reading loses out to screen time, says Susie Dent

### Level 3: Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

a. A lexicographer is a person who helps to create dictionaries. There are a variety of jobs available for people who want to work with languages. Look at the list of jobs below. Then discuss the questions.

1. What do you think each job involves?
2. Which specialised skills are needed for each role?
3. Do you think these jobs will become less important in the future?
4. Are you interested in any of these jobs? Why?
  - a language teacher
  - a linguist
  - a speech and language therapist
  - a textbook author or editor
  - a translator
  - an AI data trainer
  - an interpreter
  - lexicographer

#### 2 Key words

a. Choose the correct word or expression to match each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context. Tell students that some words may appear in a different form in the article.

enhance	magnify	foregone	in thrall to
accelerate	advent	gap	lexicographer
golden age	amid	exponentially	monolith
acquisition	eloquence	hyperbole	

1. the skill of speaking or writing in a fluent and elegant way \_\_\_\_\_
2. a break or significant difference between two things \_\_\_\_\_
3. the learning of skills and knowledge, such as languages \_\_\_\_\_
4. something that has a uniform or unoriginal quality or character \_\_\_\_\_
5. to increase the size, importance or intensity of something \_\_\_\_\_
6. to increase the speed or rate of progress of something \_\_\_\_\_

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7. a person who researches, writes and edits dictionaries \_\_\_\_\_
8. the state of being controlled or strongly influenced by someone or something  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. the beginning or arrival of something important \_\_\_\_\_
10. a period of great happiness, peace and cultural achievement \_\_\_\_\_
11. extreme exaggeration, usually for the purpose of humour \_\_\_\_\_
12. to greatly improve the quality of something \_\_\_\_\_
13. growing in an increasingly fast way \_\_\_\_\_
14. in the middle of, surrounded by, among \_\_\_\_\_
15. determined in advance, unavoidable \_\_\_\_\_

#### b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. Meryl studied linguistics with the hope of becoming a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The \_\_\_\_\_ of the printing press revolutionised modern society.
3. Do you think most people nowadays are \_\_\_\_\_ to social media?
4. Shakespeare is admired for his creativity and \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Gen Z is not a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ – young people have their own preferences and identities.
6. The election is close and the results are not a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ conclusion.
7. Mobile phone use has risen \_\_\_\_\_ over the past two decades.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ concerns about crime rates, the city has increased policing efforts.
9. Extra amenities like pools and spas can \_\_\_\_\_ the quality of your holiday.
10. When Greg said he was 'literally starving', he was using \_\_\_\_\_.

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c. Use the remaining words from task a to write your own sentences.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

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*Exclusive: Countdown lexicographer urges families to read, talk and play word games to help language development*

**Sally Weale**

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- 1 Children's vocabulary is shrinking as reading loses out to screen time, according to the lexicographer Susie Dent, who is urging families to read, talk and play word games to boost language development.
- 2 The Countdown star's warning comes as the government prepares to issue its first advice to parents on how to manage screen use in under-fives, amid concerns that excessive screen time is damaging children's language development.
- 3 "So many children are now falling behind," Dent said. "The vocabulary gap is getting bigger and there is a real perception that vocabulary development is suffering and that impacts on learning."
- 4 Citing a 2023 Oxford University Press report that found that two in five pupils had fallen behind in vocabulary development, she said: "There is a huge perception that screen time is having a negative impact on vocabulary, and I think that's because it is taking away from reading time. The digital lives of our children are taking a greater and greater role and reading certainly is in decline.
- 5 "I'm not saying no to screens altogether," Dent said. "I think technology has a huge role to play in enhancing children's vocabulary, if it's used in the right way. But I think reading is really suffering."
- 6 Dent, who has two daughters (one, she said, more in thrall to screens than the other), said English-language speakers had always been afraid of new technology.
- 7 "The Victorians were scared of the postcard because they thought it would hamper eloquence because people were going to have to cram sentences into a very small space. And the same happened with the telegram – there was great fear over that. And then we saw that magnified with the advent of the internet.
- 8 "There are many ways in which the internet is actually helping. Rather than reducing language or English to some sort of bland monolith, it's actually encouraged variety. But there is a sweet spot between over-immersion and just using it in ways that can be beneficial."
- 9 Dent, who co-presents Channel 4's Secret Genius with Alan Carr, is fronting a new campaign – working with an unexpected partner, Soreen malt loaf – aimed at boosting children's vocabulary at snack time.
- 10 A limited edition of Soreen lunchbox loaves will include fun words such as kerfuffle and hullabaloo, with definition and origins, as a way of sparking children's curiosity.
- 11 "This is really close to my heart because I spend my life trying to encourage people, especially children, to enjoy the dictionary because I think it has more drama and magic and adventure than almost any other book I can imagine, and you will also find out the most wonderful stories," Dent said.
- 12 "I think we have lost a bit of that magic. Every age has thought that the golden age of language was in the past ... and that somehow everything was perfect in the past. But I do think we are facing a huge challenge at the moment.
- 13 "Obviously our children are learning from our habits and many of us get our work emails on our phone, so actually we are working on our phone, but what children are seeing is the constant absorption by something that's not them.
- 14 "We've all seen – and I think we're all guilty of this – parents in cafes literally just looking at their phone while their children are just sitting looking as well. And that in some ways is a great sadness because conversation is everything.
- 15 "For me the biggest worry is the widening gap between children who do read and who do have good vocabulary acquisition and those who don't. It's quite a well-known effect that children who read will then accelerate their vocabulary acquisition much more quickly and it's at a much higher rate."
- 16 Is it a crisis? "When we use hyperbole for everything, it makes everything a crisis and it doesn't particularly help," Dent said. "But I think there is a huge concern around reading and vocabulary expansion.
- 17 "I would just say that there are ways that we can address it. So it is not a foregone conclusion that this is going to continue exponentially and we are about to fall off a cliff. There are definitely things that can be done.

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- 18 "Dialogue or conversation integrated into daily life is really important, also word-based games. This is another way in which actually going online can help, because there are so many brilliant word games out there."
- 19 Dent also believes that learning a foreign language can play a critical role in developing a love and understanding of English. "If there's one thing I could change, it would be to really promote the learning of foreign languages at school, because it's just huge. It's immeasurable the advantage it can give you."
- 20 Asked if it should be compulsory in schools, she said: "I would love it to be. It might seem like a chore, but I don't think anyone ever regrets having learned a foreign language."

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#### Glossary:

*kerfuffle*: a noisy and disorderly activity or argument

*hullabaloo*: a noisy and chaotic situation or problem

#### Culture:

*Countdown* and *Secret Genius* are television programmes in the UK.

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article again. Decide if the statements are True, False or Not mentioned. Then correct the false statements.

- |  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1. The UK government is concerned about the ways screen time affects children.   | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 2. Children today are spending more time reading than they did in the past.  | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 3. This is the first time in history that English speakers have worried about the influence of technology on language. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 4. Dent thinks that the internet has no benefits at all for language development.                                      | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 5. A new campaign will use lunchtime and lunch foods to teach children vocabulary.                                     | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 6. Susie Dent has loved dictionaries since the time she was a young child.   | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 7. Reading plays an important role in children's vocabulary acquisition.   | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 8. Conversations with adults have positive effects on children's language development.                                 | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 9. Most UK parents do not care about their children's language skills.   | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 10. Dent believes that students should focus on learning the English language only.                                    | True / False / Not mentioned |

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#### 4 Key language

a. Read the sentences below. Then choose the correct definitions for the underlined words.

1. The professors urge their students to pay close attention in class.
  - a. a sudden or strong desire (noun)
  - b. to encourage or forcefully recommend (verb)
2. I was locked out of my garden so my friend boosted me over the fence.
  - a. to lift up by pushing from behind or below (verb)
  - b. to promote, support, encourage or improve (verb)
3. The pupils were very excited to go to the science museum.
  - a. a young school student (noun)
  - b. the dark centre part of the eye (noun)
4. When I moved house, I got a hamper filled with fruit, nuts and cheese.
  - a. to prevent something or make it difficult for something to happen (verb)
  - b. a large basket for food, clothes, gifts or other items (noun)
5. Erin missed class most of the year, then crammed for her final test.
  - a. to force something into a small or tight place (verb)
  - b. to prepare for an exam by learning a lot of information at once (verb)
6. The light bulb started to spark during the thunderstorm.
  - a. to activate interests or emotional responses (verb)
  - b. to give out small bursts of fire or electricity (verb)
7. Absorption helps plants get the water and nutrients they need.
  - a. the process of taking in a liquid, gas or other material (noun)
  - b. the state of being completely occupied by something (noun)

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8. The play was brilliant! I loved the actors, the scenery and the costumes.

- a. amazing, excellent, incredible or enjoyable (adjective)
- b. very bright, intense or shining in colour (adjective)

b. Use the words from the previous activity. Make your own sentences using each of the definitions.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. \_\_\_\_\_

### 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- 1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of screen time for children?
- 2. Do you think children in your country have similar issues with vocabulary development? Why?
- 3. Do you agree that studying a foreign language can help you appreciate and understand your own language more? Why or why not?
- 4. Why does Dent share the information about postcards, telegrams and the invention of the internet? How do these facts explain the relationship between language and technology?



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#### 6 In your own words

- a. Read the article quickly to review the Dent's concerns and recommendations. Work in pairs or groups to create a fun, meaningful and unique word game that can support language development. As you design the game, keep the following questions in mind:
- **Game play:** What is the aim of the game? What are the rules?
  - **Format:** Is the game digital, print or available in multiple formats? Can it be played by individuals, teams or both?
  - **Players:** Who is the game for? What age groups would enjoy it? Which language levels would it benefit?
  - **Language:** What does the game focus on? Do players practise vocabulary, grammar or both? Does it include skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking?
  - **Versions:** Can the game be adapted to fit the needs of different types of players? Can it be translated into languages other than English?
- b. Present your game to the class. If there's time, take it in turns to play the game.