

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

Level 2: Intermediate

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 does?
2. Which specialised skills are needed for each job?
3. 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 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	compulsory	campaign	suffer
curiosity	eloquence	lexicographer	warning
acquisition	fall behind	shrink	golden age

1. to decrease in size, amount or value _____
2. an organised action or activity to reach a goal _____
3. the learning of skills and knowledge, such as languages _____
4. to move slower than expected; to fail to do something on time _____
5. required by rules or laws _____
6. the skill of speaking or writing in a fluent and elegant way _____
7. a period of great happiness, peace and cultural achievement _____
8. a strong desire to learn or understand something new _____

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9. to greatly improve the quality of something _____
10. a statement about a possible danger, problem or concern _____
11. a person who researches, writes and edits dictionaries _____
12. to experience physical, mental or emotional pain _____

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

1. Shakespeare is admired for his creativity and _____.
2. In some countries, school is _____ until the age of eighteen.
3. There are lots of apps to help with foreign language _____.
4. The 1920s to the 1960s are considered the _____ of cinema.
5. Meryl studied linguistics with the hope of becoming a(n) _____.
6. The news station sent out a(n) _____ about extreme weather in the area.
7. After I lost my job, I worried I would _____ on my rent and bills.
8. Extra amenities like pools and spas can _____ the quality of your holiday.
9. The university organised a(n) _____ to raise money for a local charity.

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

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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

Sally Weale

12 February, 2026

- 1 Children's vocabulary is shrinking as kids spend more time using screens and less time reading. The lexicographer Susie Dent is encouraging families to read, talk and play word games to improve language development.
- 2 Her warning comes as the government prepares to give advice to parents on how to manage screen use in children under five.
- 3 A 2023 Oxford University Press report found that two in five pupils had fallen behind in vocabulary development. Dent said: "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 is in decline.
- 4 "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."
- 5 Dent said English-language speakers had always been afraid of new technology.
- 6 "The Victorians were scared of the postcard. They thought it would affect eloquence because people were going to have to cram sentences into a very small space. And the same happened with the telegram – there was a lot of fear over that. And then that increased with the invention of the internet.
- 7 "There are many ways in which the internet is actually helping. For example, it's encouraged variety in the English language. But there is a difference between overusing it and just using it in ways that can be beneficial."
- 8 Dent is leading a new campaign. She's working with an unexpected partner, Soreen malt loaf (a brand of bread). Their aim is to boost children's vocabulary at snack time.
- 9 A limited edition of Soreen lunchbox loaves will include fun words such as kerfuffle and hullabaloo, with definition and origins, to spark children's curiosity.
- 10 "This is really close to my heart because I spend my life trying to encourage people, especially children, to enjoy the dictionary. I think it has more drama and magic and adventure than almost any other book I can imagine. You will also find out the most wonderful stories," Dent said.
- 11 "I think we lost a bit of that magic. Every age thought that the golden age of language was in the past ... and that somehow everything was perfect in the past.
- 12 "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.
- 13 "For me the biggest worry is the growing differences between children who do read and who do have good vocabulary acquisition and those who don't. It's a well-known effect that children who read will then improve their vocabulary much more quickly and at a much higher rate."
- 14 "Dialogue or conversation in 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."
- 15 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 can give you a significant advantage."
- 16 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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First published in *The Guardian*, 12/02/2026

Glossary:

kerfuffle: a noisy and disorderly activity or argument

hullabaloo: a noisy and chaotic situation or problem

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article again. Decide if the statements are True or False. Then correct the false statements.

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1. The UK government is concerned about the ways screen time affects children. | True / False |
| 2. Children today are spending more time reading than they did in the past. | True / False |
| 3. This is the first time in history that English speakers have worried about the influence of technology on language. | True / False |
| 4. Dent thinks that the internet has no benefits at all for language development. | True / False |
| 5. A new campaign will use lunchtime and lunch foods to teach children vocabulary. | True / False |
| 6. Reading plays an important role in children's vocabulary acquisition. | True / False |
| 7. Conversations with adults have positive effects on children's language development. | True / False |
| 8. Dent believes that students should focus on learning the English language only. | True / False |

4 Key language

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

1. 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)
2. 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)

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3. 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)
4. 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)
5. 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. _____

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?

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6 In your own words

- a. Read the article quickly to review Dent's concerns and recommendations. Work in pairs or groups to create a fun 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.