

Dr Maria Korochkina

The vocabulary barrier in English Literature GCSE

Supporting Vocabulary in Secondary School: A Research & Practice Workshop
8 July 2026

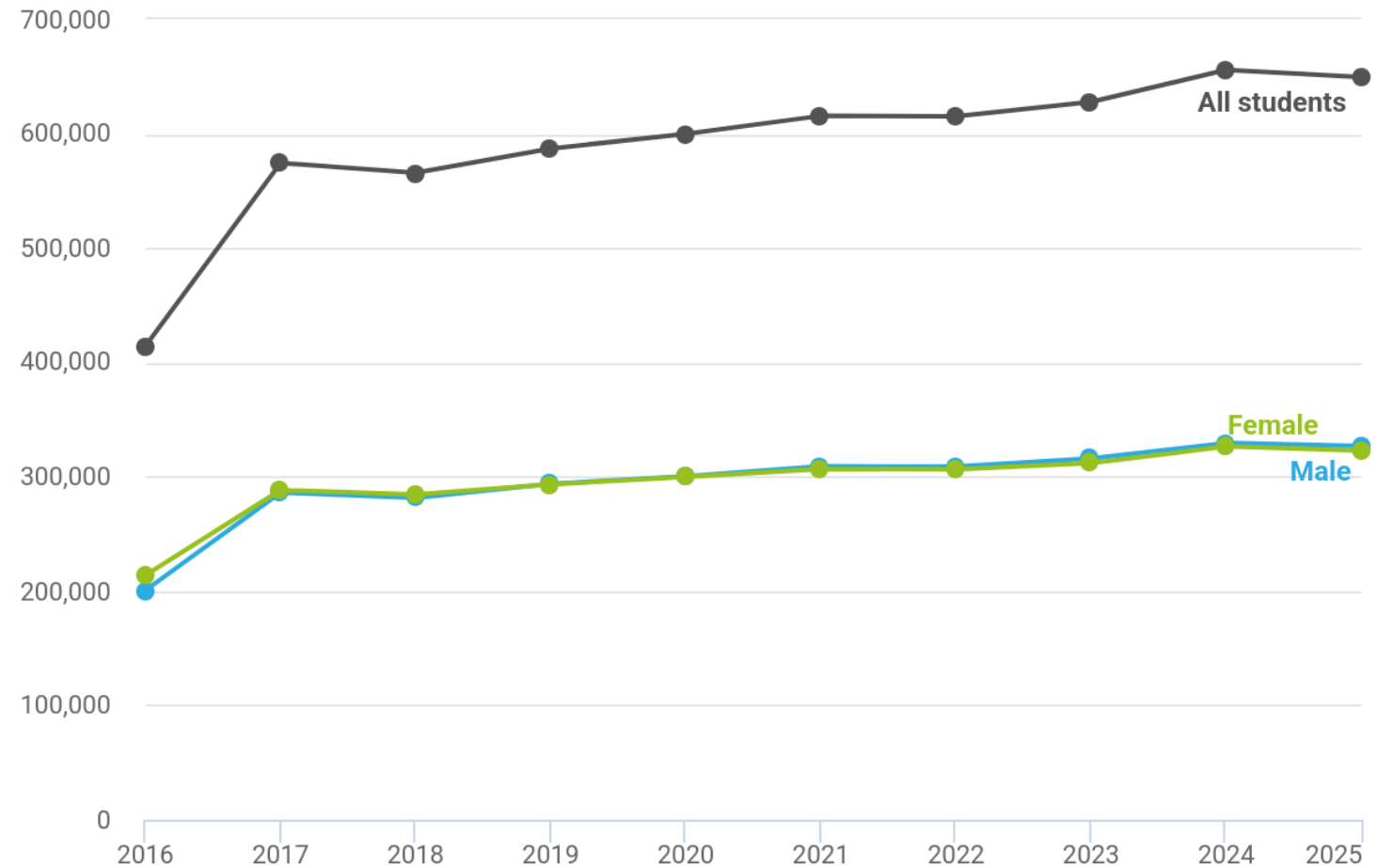


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GCSE entries in English literature, 2016-2025

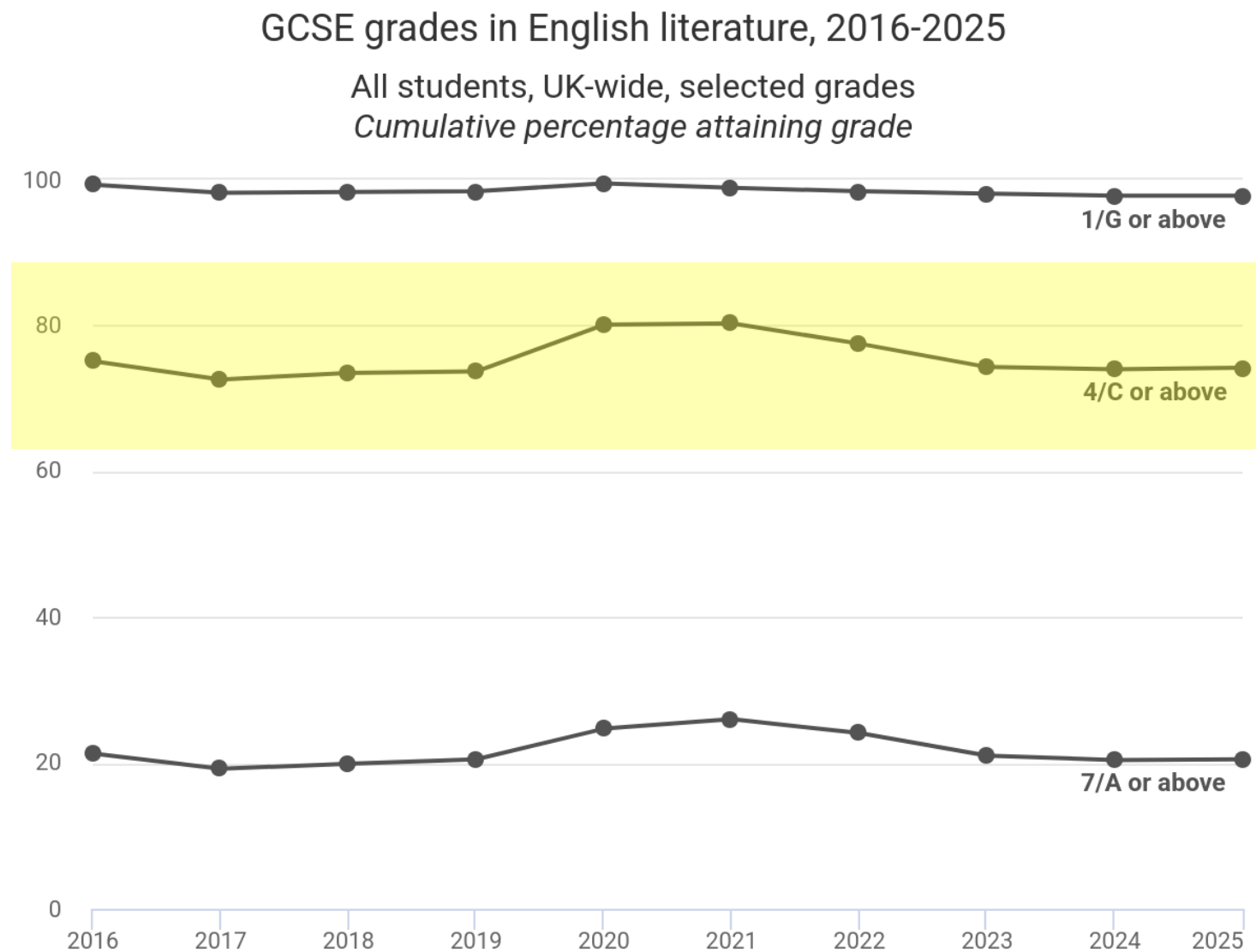
All students, UK-wide
Number of entries



**Over 500,000
entries per year
since 2017**

Source: FFT Education Datalab analysis of JCQ data
Project funded by the Nuffield Foundation

**25% of
candidates do
not achieve a
pass grade**



Source: FFT Education Datalab analysis of JCQ data
Project funded by the Nuffield Foundation

What's the vocabulary like in the GCSE texts?

32 prose books from the AQA and EdExcel specifications



Compared to 200 different samples of 32 books popular with teenagers

The Children and Young People's Books Lexicon

1,200 **popular** books – 400 books per age band
Over 70mln words & over 105K distinct words

7-9 years



10-12 years



13-16 years



Highly dense vocabulary in the GCSE books



- GCSE books are **half as long as** popular books, but contain a **similar number of distinct words**
- GCSE books are much **less homogenous** in the words they use



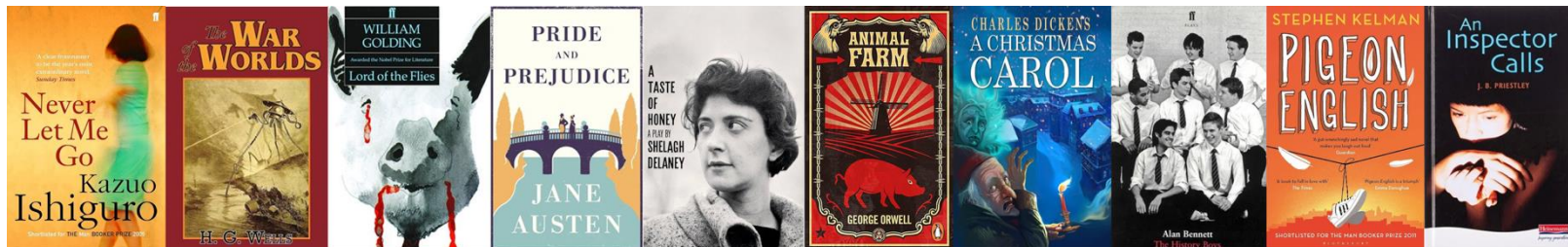
- **More vocabulary** through **less text** in the GCSE books
- Texts **harder to understand** as a whole

Many unfamiliar words in the GCSE books

- Only **33%** of the distinct words **occur regularly** in popular books
- The remaining **67% are used sparsely**
- **3,000** distinct words **never used on 9 BBC TV channels over 3 years**
 - *poulterer, bonneted, dowerless, bedight, sepulchre, catechize*
 - *brusquely, docilely, imploringly, beatifically, superciliously*



- GCSE texts will stretch **even those who read widely**
- Weaker readers **may not be able to access** these texts at all



Many unfamiliar GCSE words are **new roots**

- Pupils often encounter unfamiliar words even in popular books
- Typically, their meanings **can be derived** from the words' constituents: mourn + ful + ly
- In GCSE books, most “new” words are **new roots** → Meanings **cannot be derived** from the words' structure
 - *aspidistra, crimplene, beseech, coccidia, gambol*



- Pupils **must rely on context or instruction** to understand these words
- Deriving meaning from context requires **advanced language and reading skills**

Is GCSE English Lit **fit for purpose**?

GCSE English Literature should enable students to. . .

- read in depth, critically, and evaluatively
- develop the habit of reading widely and often
- appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage

Yet...

- Less than 30% of children read daily in their free time
- Many will lack the skills required to access the GCSE course
- Curriculum review **should consider** the huge **variation in children's language and reading skills...**
- 2024 review: "promote a wider range of literary voices while retaining core texts [...] without adding to the mandatory volume of content"

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- 2024 review: "promote a wider range of literary voices while retaining core texts [...] without adding to the mandatory volume of content"; **no mention of variation in skills**



There is a **virtuous cycle between reading skills and reading motivation**



Original Article



The Children and Young People's Books Lexicon (CYP-LEX): A large-scale lexical database of books read by children and young people in the United Kingdom

Maria Korochkina ¹, Marco Marelli ², Marc Brysbaert ³, and Kathleen Rastle ¹

<https://cyp-lex.rastlelab.com/>



Maria Korochkina & Kathy Rastle
Mar 12, 2024 · 5 min read

What Words do Children Encounter When They Read for Pleasure?

The ability to read opens up worlds. Reading enables children to progress into post-primary education and provides the basis for lifelong...

<https://www.rastlelab.com/blog>

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THE VOCABULARY BARRIER IN THE GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION (GCSE) IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Maria Korochkina* and Kathleen Rastle

The English Association Journal
for Teachers of English

THE USE OF english

<https://www.tes.com/magazine>

What makes GCSE English lit so hard for students?

New research has analysed GCSE literature texts against popular fiction – and found three key reasons why so many young people struggle with the qualification



Maria Korochkina

Further reading

Article | [Open access](#) | Published: 05 May 2025

Morphology in children's books, and what it means for learning

[Maria Korochkina](#) & [Kathleen Rastle](#)

npj Science of Learning 10, Article number: 22 (2025) | [Cite this article](#)

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What can children learn about morphology from reading for fun?

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Holly Cooper



Marco Marelli



Marc Brysbaert



Kathy Rastle

Thank you!



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