Super El Niño: What a Forecast Can and Cannot Tell Us

Name Date Class

Reading

1 In September 2026, forecasters at the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said that the El Niño in the Pacific Ocean was continuing to **intensify**. They gave a greater than 90 percent chance that it would become "very strong" by the end of the year. News outlets called it a "super El Niño," an informal label, not an official category. But what can such a forecast tell farmers, water managers, and aid agencies, and what can it not tell them?

2 The name comes from Peru. In the nineteenth century, Peruvian fishermen noticed a warm current that appeared around Christmas, and they named it after the Christ child: *el niño* means "the child" in Spanish. Scientists later used the name for years when the warming is much stronger and more widespread. Normally, trade winds push warm surface water west. During an El Niño, those winds weaken and the warm water **shifts** east. NOAA **declares** an El Niño when the sea surface in a key part of the equatorial Pacific is at least 0.5°C warmer than average and the atmosphere responds. It calls an event very strong when the warming passes a **threshold** of 2.0°C. El Niño events tend to return every two to seven years.

3 Because the tropical Pacific is so large, El Niño **disrupts** rainfall and temperatures far away. Records show a pattern. Indonesia, Australia, and southern Africa tend to be drier than normal during El Niño years, while the coasts of Peru and Ecuador tend to be wetter. In India, a weak monsoon, the summer rainy season that farmers depend on, is more likely during an El Niño, and the risk of **drought** rises. But the pattern is loose. A study by K. Krishna Kumar of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, reported by the magazine *Down to Earth*, looked at El Niño years from 1880 to 2004: monsoon rainfall was below normal in 10 of them and normal in 13.

4 The clearest **exceptions** have come during strong events. The 1997-98 El Niño was one of the strongest of the twentieth century, yet India's monsoon rainfall in 1997 was slightly above normal, a result later studied by Indian scientists. In late 2015, during another very strong El Niño, NOAA's seasonal outlooks favored a wetter than normal winter in Southern California. Instead, the region stayed dry while heavy rain fell farther north. A 2018 study by researchers at Columbia University suggested one reason: the warmest water sat farther west than in earlier strong events. A high **likelihood** is not a promise.

5 El Niño is never the only influence. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has said that the strength of an El Niño does not directly match the strength of its impacts, and that no two events are alike. Other ocean patterns, such as the Indian Ocean Dipole, can push the weather in the same direction or the opposite one, and long-term warming also plays a part. El Niño's effect on global temperature tends to be strongest in the year after it begins. The WMO says the 2023-24 El Niño **contributed** to 2024 becoming the warmest year on record, but it named greenhouse gases as the main cause of the recent heat.

6 The costs can **persist** long after an event ends. In **severe** cases, floods and droughts can **trigger** crop failures and disease outbreaks. In a 2023 study in the journal *Science*, Christopher Callahan and Justin Mankin of Dartmouth College estimated that the 1997-98 El Niño reduced global income by $5.7 trillion, because slower economic growth continued for at least five years. That is more than 100 times an earlier World Bank estimate of $45 billion in costs to governments, and some outside economists think the Dartmouth figures are too large. The gap mainly shows that the answer depends on what is counted and for how long.

7 Forecasts give people time. Floods, droughts, and fires are **hazards** that cannot be stopped, but aid agencies now try to **anticipate** El Niño's effects and act before they arrive, especially for **vulnerable** farming families. In 2023, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) supported repairs to about 4,600 meters of damaged riverbank along Somalia's Shabelle River before expected floods. By its own assessment, every dollar spent on such early action brings farming families more than seven dollars in avoided losses and other benefits. For 2026-27, the forecast gives a probability, not a map of damage. Whether each region follows the usual pattern will be known only after its rainy season is measured.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**intensify**	_____	**A**	moves or changes position
2	**shifts**	_____	**B**	things that can cause harm
3	**declares**	_____	**C**	expect something and prepare for it
4	**threshold**	_____	**D**	helped to cause something
5	**disrupts**	_____	**E**	the chance that something will happen
6	**drought**	_____	**F**	easily harmed or affected
7	**exceptions**	_____	**G**	interrupts the normal course of something
8	**likelihood**	_____	**H**	announces something officially
9	**contributed**	_____	**I**	cases that do not follow the usual pattern
10	**persist**	_____	**J**	very serious or extreme
11	**severe**	_____	**K**	cause something to start suddenly
12	**trigger**	_____	**L**	the level at which something changes
13	**hazards**	_____	**M**	a long period with very little rain
14	**anticipate**	_____	**N**	become stronger or more extreme
15	**vulnerable**	_____	**O**	continue to exist for a long time

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

anticipate	**contributed**	**declares**	**disrupts**	**drought**	**exceptions**	**intensify**	**likelihood**	**persist**
severe	**shifts**	**threshold**	**trigger**	**vulnerable**				

1 As the argument went on, the anger began to _____ , and both sides raised their voices.

2 When the wind _____ to the west, the smoke blows toward the town.

3 Each year the city _____ a public holiday on the day of the festival.

4 Your body temperature has to pass a certain _____ before doctors call it a fever.

5 Construction work on the main road _____ traffic every morning.

6 After two years without rain, the _____ forced farmers to sell their cattle.

7 Most shops close on Sundays, but there are a few _____ near the station.

8 Leaving home early reduces the _____ of missing the train.

9 Long working hours _____ to her stress last year.

10 Old habits can _____ long after we decide to change them.

11 The _____ storm knocked down trees across the city.

12 Even a small spark can _____ a large forest fire.

13 Hotels in the area _____ a busy summer and are hiring extra staff.

14 Older people are more _____ to heat waves than young adults.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What did NOAA forecast in September 2026, and why is "super El Niño" not an official term?

2 Where does the name El Niño come from?

3 What happens to the trade winds and the warm water during an El Niño, and when does NOAA call an event very strong?

4 Which regions tend to be drier and which tend to be wetter during El Niño years?

5 Why does the writer say that the pattern for India is "loose"?

6 Describe the two exceptions in the fourth paragraph. What possible reason for the second one does the reading give?

7 Besides El Niño, what else shapes the weather and global temperature, according to the fifth paragraph?

8 Why are the Dartmouth and World Bank estimates of the cost of the 1997-98 El Niño so different?

9 How strong is the evidence for the FAO's claim about early action? What would you want to know before accepting the figure?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The study described in Down to Earth found that India's monsoon was below normal in most El Niño years."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that a forecast of a very strong El Niño shows exactly which places will be damaged."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer describe India in 1997 and Southern California in 2015-16? What effect does this have on the reader?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** NOAA gave a greater than 90 percent chance of a very strong El Niño.

2 **T / F** "Super El Niño" is an official category used by NOAA.

3 **T / F** El Niño means "the child" in Spanish.

4 **T / F** During an El Niño, the trade winds become stronger.

5 **T / F** NOAA calls an El Niño very strong when the warming passes 2.0°C.

6 **T / F** Australia tends to be wetter than normal during El Niño years.

7 **T / F** India's monsoon rainfall in 1997 was slightly above normal.

8 **T / F** The WMO says that every El Niño has the same effects.

9 **T / F** Some economists think the Dartmouth estimates are too large.

10 **T / F** The FAO repaired a riverbank in Somalia after the floods had destroyed the crops.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Before you read, what did you know about El Niño? Which part of the reading was most new to you?

2 Where do you get weather information, and how much do you trust it?

3 Can you remember a time when the weather surprised everyone? What happened?

4 What kinds of weather cause the most problems where you live?

5 If a forecast says there is a 60 percent chance of rain, what do you do? Would you cancel an outdoor plan?

6 Why do you think news outlets use labels like "super El Niño"? Are such labels helpful or misleading?

7 Which groups of people in your country are most vulnerable to droughts, floods, or heat waves? Why?

8 Farmers, city water managers, and insurance companies all use seasonal forecasts. How might each group use the same forecast differently?

9 Should governments spend money preparing for a disaster that might not happen? How should they decide?

10 If a government acts on a forecast and the disaster does not come, was the money wasted? Why or why not?

11 The two estimates of El Niño's cost differ by more than 100 times. How should the public treat large numbers like these in the news?

12 Aid agencies often measure the success of their own programs. What are the advantages and risks of this?

13 Scientists say El Niño and climate change both affect the weather. Why might people confuse the two, and does it matter?

14 Rich and poor countries face the same El Niño but with different resources. What, if anything, do richer countries owe poorer ones when a forecast warns of hunger?

Language Focus: Describing Tendencies and Probability: Tend To and Likely

Use tend to plus a base verb for something that usually happens but not always (Dry weather tends to follow). Use be likely to plus a base verb, or be more likely, for something that probably will happen. Both are softer than will or always, and they let a writer describe a pattern without claiming a rule.

In the reading:

- "El Niño events **tend to return** every two to seven years."
- "Indonesia, Australia, and southern Africa **tend to be** drier than normal during El Niño years…"
- "…a weak monsoon, the summer rainy season that farmers depend on, **is more likely** during an El Niño…"

Practice: Rewrite each sentence with the word in brackets: *"Winters in this region are usually mild." (tend)* and *"It will probably rain on Saturday." (likely)*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/super-el-nino

Notes