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FEATURES OF SYSTEMATIC PREPARATION FOR THE ALL-RUSSIAN OLYMPIAD OF SCHOOLCHILDREN IN ENGLISH: TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

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Abstract

Relevance. The study of the features of preparation for the All-Russian Olympiad of schoolchildren is timely and relevant for a number of reasons, including the constantly growing interest to this intellectual project on the part of students and teachers, as well as the high importance of the Olympiad movement to increase the intellectual potential of the nation.

Aim. The article aims to reveal the features of the modern Olympiad competition in English, as well as to show the systemic nature of preparation for the Olympiad.

Procedure and methods. Among the main methods of research are the analysis of the publication activity of modern authors on the declared topic, content analysis of the content of tasks of previous years, the study of official documents published by the central subject-methodological commission.

Scientific novelty and/or theoretical and/or practical significance. The article clarifies the term "Olympiad", as well as indicates the features of training schoolchildren at the current stage.

Results of the study. The systemic nature of preparation for the Olympiad tours and an understanding of the evolution of the competition allows us to achieve high-quality results.

Conclusion. The Olympic movement is one of the main drivers of improving the quality of education in the country, participation in the Olympiad conceptually allows us to educate schoolchildren who can think independently and creatively.

Keywords: Olympiad exam, language assessment, Olympiad preparation, assessment criteria, gifted children

ОСОБЕННОСТИ СИСТЕМНОЙ ПОДГОТОВКИ К ВСЕРОССИЙСКОЙ ОЛИМПИАДЕ ШКОЛЬНИКОВ ПО АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ: ТРАДИЦИИ И ИННОВАЦИИ

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Аннотация

Актуальность. Исследование особенностей подготовки к Всероссийской олимпиаде школьников является своевременным и актуальным по ряду причин, среди которых – постоянно растущий интерес к данному интеллектуальному проекту со стороны учащихся и учителей, а

также высокая значимость олимпиадного движения для повышения интеллектуального потенциала нации.

Цель – раскрыть особенности современного олимпиадного конкурса по английскому языку, а также показать системный характер подготовки к олимпиаде.

Методы исследования. Среди основных методов исследования – анализ публикационной активности современных авторов по заявленной тематике, контент-анализ содержания заданий прошлых лет, изучение официальных документов, опубликованных центральной предметно-методической комиссией.

Научная новизна / теоретическая и/или практическая значимость. В статье уточняется значение термина «олимпиада», а также указываются особенности подготовки школьников на современном этапе.

Результаты исследования. Системный характер подготовки к олимпиадным турам и понимание эволюции конкурса позволяют добиваться качественных результатов.

Выводы. Олимпиадное движение является одним из основных драйверов улучшения качества образования в стране, участие в олимпиаде концептуально позволяет воспитать школьников, умеющих самостоятельно и креативно мыслить.

Ключевые слова: олимпиада школьников, языковое тестирование, подготовка к олимпиаде, критерии оценивания, одарённые дети

INTRODUCTION

The Olympiad movement in Russia is a unique youth project that combines 24 subjects into a single system of intellectual competitions. First held in the 1930s, for a long time subject Olympiads were limited to competitions in the sciences, such as mathematics, physics and chemistry. However, in the Russian Federation, competitions in the humanities were launched alongside these within the framework of the implementation of government-funded projects aimed at the development of young talent. Despite the specifics of modern foreign languages as a subject, Olympiad tasks are compiled with the main objective of the Olympiad movement, i. e. the development of a lasting interest in scientific creativity enabling yesterday's school students to successfully carry on their education at university, in mind. The English language Olympiad dates back to 1998 and has been in continuous operation since then for over 20 years. Recent task sets are extremely complex, and strong performance is indicative not only of a very high level of English proficiency, but also of a number of interdisciplinary skills, i. e. the so-called "soft skills", "21st century skills", or "universal competencies". All of these terms are equivalent in meaning and denote the

knowledge, skills and ways of thinking that are important in navigating life in today's society.

MAIN PART

The aim and objectives of the study. In line with this, the purpose of our study is to examine the types of universal competencies and evaluate their significance in Olympiad preparation. Thus, the relevance of our research is associated both with the identification of competencies necessary for strong performance in subject Olympiads and increasing the interest of schools as institutions and the general public in subject Olympiads, including Olympiads in foreign languages. The theoretical significance of our research lies in the fact that we name universal competencies amongst those important for Olympiad preparation, which is not in any way reflected in the program documents of the All-Russian School Olympiad in English. The practical significance lies in the development of a textbook that focuses not only on communicative competence, but first and foremost on universal competencies. Our hypothesis is that by developing such skills, we contribute to the holistic upbringing of an individual characterised by maturity and flexible thinking, a creative approach and the ability to solve unfamiliar and non-standard

problems – and as a result, to perform well in Olympiad projects.

Methodology. As part of our research, we studied publications focussing on the development of universal competencies in various national education systems, as well as at the international level [5; 13]. We also analysed the program documents of the All-Russian School Olympiad in English, along with comments and explanations from the central subject methodological commission¹ [4; 6; 7]. We have studied a number of articles on the organisation of and preparation for international scientific Olympiads, including research by Russian authors on the same topic [8; 9; 10]. Special attention was paid to articles and publications on the issue of the development of linguistic talent in the context of the Olympiad movement [11; 12]. A number of researchers view communicative competence as the basis of universal competencies, whilst others' research has covered the development of these competencies within the framework of distance learning [1; 2; 3; 16]. As part of this study, we carried out content analysis of past papers of various linguistic Olympiads in the English language, which enabled us to draw a number of conclusions concerning methodological approaches to their development and prompted us to study of the nature of universal competencies in more depth² [14]. We have studied contemporary articles touching on the acquisition of universal knowledge, skills and ways of thinking that facilitate successful functioning in a 21st-century society [15; 16; 17; 18]. Whilst coaching school students at

the Centre for Pedagogical Excellence in Moscow, we carried out pedagogical observation of students and analysis of the most successful teaching methods [19; 20; 21]. We also analysed the most successful models implemented by coaches in other subjects.

Organisation of research and progress.

Participation in intellectual competitions, despite their pronounced academic character, is not merely a test of the knowledge and skills of the students; it also stretches their ability to cope with stress, time pressure and the pressure of their own (and others') expectations. The ability to detach from the importance of the event, to fully concentrate on completing tasks and avoid panic and remain calm at this crucial moment often comes to the forefront and defines the outcome of a competition between intellectual equals. Participation in the Olympiad movement is a modern trend in education that is continuing to gain momentum, since Olympiads have de-facto become a pathway into the top Russian universities. We deliberately narrow the field of our research to concentrate on school Olympiads, as university-level Olympiads, despite similar organisational principles, are not as popular or widespread. In addition, historically, Olympiads were held by higher educational institutions to increase the prestige of science and creativity and to attract school students to pursue this education trajectory in higher education.

It is worth clarifying the term "*Olympiad*", the use of which, whilst common in modern pedagogy, is not always justified. In our view, not every intellectual competition can be considered an Olympiad. Per our understanding of the term, an Olympiad is an intellectual competition distinguished by several key defining characteristics:

1. Voluntary participation. At the same time, students may equally well be driven by an internal motivation and appetite for learning and/or an understanding of the important role of subject Olympiads in modern education as a vehicle of social mobility.

2. Free access. At all stages of the Olympiad, the organisers must cover most of the organisational costs, and it is completely un-

¹ Методические рекомендации по проведению школьного и муниципального этапов всероссийской олимпиады школьников по английскому языку в 2019/2020 уч. г. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://vserosolymp.rudn.ru> (дата обращения: 18.11.2021).

² Задания всероссийской олимпиады школьников по английскому языку // Информационный сайт Всероссийской олимпиады. URL: <http://vos.olimpiada.ru> (дата обращения: 14.11.2021).
Заключительный этап всероссийской олимпиады школьников в Калининградской области в 2021 году. Работы победителей и призёров, протоколы, ключи [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://edu.gov39.ru> (дата обращения: 07.11.2021).

acceptable that these costs be borne by the participating children's parents or legal guardians.

3. Direct or indirect participation of the state in organizing competitions. For instance, the organiser of the All-Russian Olympiad for schoolchildren is the Ministry of Education; university Olympiads are organized on-site by universities themselves, but the Ministry of Education and Science still plays a role in their organisation by means of annually revising and publishing the list of 'recommended' university Olympiads that may be considered by higher education institutions in defining their preferential admission procedures.

4. A multi-level participation system with a defined selection process and a final stage held either in person or online with the use of proctoring, or distance invigilation, software.

5. Interregional or nationwide collaboration in the organisation of the competition and participation of students representing several subjects of the Federation using uniform test materials.

6. Mass participation at the early qualifying stages, providing not only final-year students, but also students in grades 7-10 with an opportunity to gain Olympiad experience and get a flavour of the atmosphere of the movement.

7. Information support by the executive authorities, i.e., availability of Internet resources that provide free access to information related to the organisation of and preparation for the Olympiad, including official protocols, past papers, and examiners' reports.

8. Transparency surrounding the organisation of competitions and the use of objective assessment criteria. Students must be provided with an opportunity to review their own work after it's been marked, see where marks were lost, and appeal their results if necessary.

9. Inclusion of creative tasks in the question papers, requiring proficiency in a number of universal skills in addition to subject competencies, such as the ability to think flexibly and creatively, to analyse information, etc.

10. A clear protocol for the development and review of question papers and the pres-

ence of independent approbation that preserves the necessary secrecy of the procedure.

We can therefore define an Olympiad as *a free large-scale intellectual competition for school students of an interregional or nationwide nature, held with the participation or support of the government, using previously unpublished tasks that build on participants' creative skills.*

Every year the list of subjects Olympiads may be held in is revised and expanded; for example, modern foreign languages such as Italian, Spanish and Chinese have recently been added to the list for the All-Russian Olympiad, whilst university-organised Olympiads feature disciplines such as economics, journalism, linguistics, etc.¹. A logical question arises from all of this; what Olympiads should students preferentially take part in, and what is the aim? We believe an apt comparison can be drawn between subject Olympiads and sports – it is certainly possible to dabble in different fields of knowledge at an amateur level, but participation in the final stages is more akin to a professional sport, and strong performance does not come about accidentally. Comprehensive, goal-focussed practice is the key to success; at the same time, stress must also be reckoned with as an important factor in determining competition outcomes. Olympiads are important exam-style events that can serve as a gateway into university and an opportunity to guarantee a free place. We offer the following recommendations to help students control their emotions and cope with stress, as well as gain psychological stability.

1. Model Olympiad conditions whilst practicing – work under timed conditions, in crowded rooms, with open windows and other sources of noise. It is important to make sure that none of these factors can throw you off balance on the day of the competition itself.

¹ Приказ Министерства науки и высшего образования Российской Федерации от 31.08.2021 № 804 «Об утверждении перечня олимпиад школьников и их уровней на 2021/22 учебный год» [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202110270027> (дата обращения: 14.11.2021).

2. Take part in a variety of Olympiads, even if you are skeptical about your chances of success in certain individual subjects. The highly competitive atmosphere of the Olympiads can initially have a negative impact on performance, so it is important to gain experience in Olympiads in other subject areas where failure will not affect further educational trajectory.

3. Make sure to participate in as many university Olympiads in your chosen subject as you can. You may not be able to win all of them, but success in at least one will boost your confidence and lift the pressure on you in future Olympiads, including the All-Russian Olympiad. Knowing that you have already earned a diploma that has secured you a place at university, you will be less overwhelmed by the stress of the high stakes of the results during other competitions.

Our empirical experience of working with Moscow school students at the Centre for Pedagogical Excellence (GAOU DPO) has shown the effectiveness of these recommendations¹. For instance, participants regularly sit mock rounds of the Olympiad, competing for rankings within the group. Encouraging participation in the municipal and regional rounds of the All-Russian School Olympiad in various subjects is an important feature of our coaching strategy; students regularly combine in-depth study of different, often unrelated, subjects. Participation in several final stages (again, in different subjects) at once is also not uncommon. There are also many university Olympiads on offer, owing to the large number of universities in Moscow that hold their own Olympiads.

By following this strategy, students can minimise the risk of underperforming due to stress and give their best in intellectual competitions, fully concentrating on the tasks at hand.

The Olympiad movement in the Russian Federation is currently the main driver of the development of talent in school students. Subject Olympiads test are a test of, aside from subject competence, universal skills – critical and creative thinking, applying problem solving skills to non-standard problems, and navigating situations with constantly changing conditions. The only feature of the Olympiads that isn't in a constant state of flux is the constant novelty of the formats. Of course, this raises several questions, namely, how is it possible to avoid repetition, and how do the task developers fulfil their own task of producing something unexpected?

Foreign language Olympiads are marked by several distinctive features. Above all, all language Olympiads have their own characteristics and, in fact, despite the common niche shared by the subjects, their formats are not related in any way. Of course, there are certain universal elements – all linguistic Olympiads are broadly composed of written and listening comprehension tasks, grammar and vocabulary tests, and productive (writing and speaking) tasks. This, however, is as far as the similarities extend, since the central subject-methodological commissions for different languages are not interested in adopting a standard shared format, as is the case in the system of state examinations. On the one hand, this inconsistency is somewhat surprising; on the other hand, the diversity of the task authors' approaches and opinions force linguistically gifted students with experience of participating in language Olympiads to start their preparation virtually from scratch as far as understanding the competition format goes should they want to experiment with Olympiads in a new language. It is hardly possible to imagine that the representatives of the central subject-methodological commissions do not have any communication channels; we therefore attribute this state of affairs to the broader aim of the Olympiad movement – the development of the creative abilities of school students. Recall that the Olympiad is an intermediate link in the educational trajectory of students between graduation from school and

¹ Сводные данные об участии московских школьников в заключительном этапе Всероссийской олимпиады школьников в 2010–2021 гг по предметам [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://vos.olimpiada.ru/upload/files/stat-moscow-2010-21.pdf> (дата обращения: 14.11.2021).

the beginning of their studies at the university. It should then be logically expected that Olympiad winners with a record of strong performance in complex intellectual competitions are prepared for higher education, where academic success largely depends on independent thinking and eagerness to learn – not by simply regurgitating learned ‘truths’, but by acquiring knowledge through independent research. In today’s world, with its constant technical revolutions and an ever-changing labour market, the ability to independently master relevant skills and adapt to frequent change is a key factor of success.

Let us now turn to the specific content features of the tasks of the All-Russian School Olympiad in the English language¹. Firstly, listening and reading comprehension tasks (these include ‘integrated’ tasks) are complex, with a high difficulty level. For example, Integrated Listening and Reading is a section where students need to identify which text a certain piece of information was present in; the possible answers are ‘only the listening text’, ‘only the reading text’, ‘both’ or ‘neither’. Despite the fact that this task format has been an Olympiad mainstay since 2011, it still presents considerable difficulty to many students. On the one hand, weak performance is partly explained by the uniqueness of the format – it is only present at the regional and final stages, which means students who did not intentionally prepare for the Olympiad are unfamiliar with the problem-solving strategies that come in handy (and are often necessary) in these types of tasks. Not many textbooks deal with this format, either, in part due to the difficulties it presents for authors. On the other hand, even experienced participants who embark on their Olympiad journey in grade 9 and, figuratively speaking, conquer the peaks of Mount Olympus until their graduation, regularly make mistakes in integrated tasks. In our opinion, this is a direct corollary of the

nature of the task – students are used to focusing on one question at a time, and when multitasking is introduced into the test, they simply find themselves struggling to keep track of everything. At the same time, all Olympiad tasks are extremely complex, which means that a loss of concentration and a lack of reading between the lines can lead students to fail them.

Productive, i. e. writing and speaking, tasks are equally non-standard. Olympiad tasks often set out a complicated communicative goal, which, aside from requiring the observation of certain requirements of the genre, entails some external element – the task may be, for instance, to produce a text based on a given stimulus in the form of a picture or the first sentence of the text; alternatively, a monologue may need to be synchronised with the visuals of a video. These tasks are truly creative, pushing students to demonstrate creative thinking skills and an unconventional approach by generating their own unique ‘product’.

However, students’ creativity is put to the test throughout the Olympiad as a whole. The most challenging section is traditionally the grammar and vocabulary test, which, alongside tasks based on widespread international task formats testing students’ knowledge of vocabulary and grammar per se, include tasks that lean heavily on socio-cultural and creative competencies. ‘Mixed’ tasks, when both lexical and grammatical categories and cultural realities are combined in a single question, are not a rarity. And whilst it is possible to prepare for regional studies questions by methodically studying literature on related topics, creative tasks in the form of crosswords, logical riddles, and wordplay resist advance preparation. These tasks focus on universal problem-solving skills rather than raw knowledge alone. This approach originated in the natural and mathematical sciences and over time made it into the humanities; it is therefore appropriate to speak about a “problem within a problem”. To successfully solve the core language puzzle, participants must first interpret the wording of the task, unravel its logic and develop a

¹ Гулов А. П. Олимпрайв. Интегральный сборник олимпиадных заданий по английскому языку. Лексика, грамматика, страноведение. 2-е изд., стер. Москва: Издательство Московского центра непрерывного математического образования, 2020. 392 с.

plan for solving it – all of this in a very limited time frame. It follows from this that the most sensible preparation tactic is gaining familiarity with as many different formats as possible, which ultimately both expands students' horizons in terms of understanding the features of different tasks and allows them to learn to adapt to a new format quickly.

Many participants view these tasks as overly complex and believe that they do not allow them to demonstrate their language skills *per se*. However, in our opinion, there is a certain reason behind this. Firstly, the aim of the competition is to rank students and single out those who are the best amongst their peers, not simply children with strong language skills (of which there are, understandably, many). Secondly, once mastered, the competencies of thinking and interacting with oneself and the world around them make it possible for students to equally master any discipline, which eventually becomes the key to excelling in higher education even for those children who didn't manage to win a diploma at the Olympiad. One of the key aims of the Olympiad movement is ultimately to foster self-development and encourage immersion in science and creativity. Thirdly, language proficiency is a pre-requisite for successfully solving these types of tasks, as it is impossible to complete them without being highly proficient in the language proper.

As a final point in this section, it is worth touching on the constant evolution of the content of tasks. We observe not only a gradual increase in the difficulty level, but also the introduction of new techniques and refinement of assessment criteria, which, in general, increases transparency and makes even clearer the value of participation in similar educational projects. Language Olympiads contribute to the identification and development of students' full creative potential, which is one of the priorities in modern foreign language education.

Study results and discussion. The Olympiad movement in the Russian Federation is a system of intellectual competitions in 24 school subjects, designed to increase children's

and teenagers' interest in science and creativity, as well as to identify young talent within a competitive framework. The All-Russian Olympiad in English is one of the competitions with the widest reach, as interest in this subject is fuelled by the global importance of the language. As well as being the *lingua franca* of science, politics, business, sports, and much more, English is also one of the subjects many of the top Russian universities require high exam scores in. Many students view the Olympiad and Olympiad preparation as a means of acquisition and systematisation of in-depth knowledge of the subject, since the difficulty level of Olympiad tasks always stretches beyond the school curriculum.

As a general rule, Olympiad preparation takes place in the framework of extracurricular education, often at various centres for the development of talent. Many online schools are also major players in the educational services market. However, a seemingly simpler solution comes to mind – why can't schools prepare their students for Olympiads on their own, without the help of tutors, educational centres, or external consultants? In our opinion, all the prerequisites for the successful operation of Olympiad courses in schools are there – these can be run by school teachers with the support of representatives of higher education institutions. Of course, further professional training is an important factor in the development of teachers' competence within the sphere of Olympiad coaching. Methodological support focussing on choosing appropriate textbooks, studying contemporary approaches to the development of Olympiad tasks, and elucidating the methodological recommendations of the central subject-methodological commission, alongside practical expert assessment of productive (writing and speaking) skills, can help teachers develop their own Olympiad preparation programmes.

The further professional training courses we conducted at the Pearson Learning Studio at the Rudomino Academy in Moscow revealed a number of general issues that teachers face. Our empirical experience of coaching students for the All-Russian Olympiad con-

sists in working at the “Centre for Pedagogical Excellence” in Moscow, an extracurricular education centre established by the Department of Education that hosts preparation courses for the All-Russian Olympiad in 24 subjects. The author has worked as a coach of the Moscow team (from 2017 to 2021), through which he has gained experience both with school students and with teachers preparing teenagers for the English language Olympiad in the schools of Moscow.

We offer our vision of a possible classification of problems that teachers are experiencing, along with possible ways to solve them.

1. Lack of own language competencies hindering successful work with past Olympiad papers, the level of which is C1-C2. *Solution:* learning the language at an advanced level, ideally with exposure to, and assistance from, native speakers. We recommend programmes aimed at preparation for international C2 level exams such as the CPE or the IELTS.

2. Lack of experience working with gifted adolescents, whose personalities range from extremely introverted to hyperactive and overly curious – all requiring a special approach. *Solution:* studying the psychological basis and specific features of the behaviour of gifted children and mastering the pedagogical practices commonly employed for communicating with them.

3. Failure to understand the importance of developing students’ creative and critical thinking skills to solving non-standard Olympiad problems. *Solution:* studying scientific materials and publication on universal competencies and interdisciplinary skills.

4. Lack of professional dialogue with the examiners at the municipal and regional stages, which leads to a misunderstanding of assessment criteria, especially in writing and speaking tasks. *Solution:* creating an Internet platform to house the program documents of the Olympiad, as well as launching an interactive forum enabling professional dialogue on the Internet.

5. Lack of familiarity with contemporary textbooks on which to rely in the organisation of Olympiad preparation. *Solution:* study the

market for educational materials, including our copyright manuals published by the publishers MCNMO, Title, Pearson, etc.

Our courses for teachers were held online in August–October 2021 and were open to teachers from all regions of the country, with a government-approved certificate issued to participants upon completion. The issues outlined above relating to the preparation of school students for the Olympiad were discussed within the framework of professional pedagogical communication. In our opinion, similar refresher courses should be held on a regular basis in all subjects of the Federation with the involvement of specialists who take part in organising municipal or regional stages of the Olympiad in the region.

Every school in Russia hosts the school round of the Olympiad, so school teachers cannot be excluded from the Olympiad movement. The top performers in each school progress into the municipal tour, which is an important milestone, as strong performance at the municipal level, in turn, allows students to take part in the regional stage, and preparation for it should thus be taken seriously. The Olympiad movement today enjoys increased attention from children and parents alike, as the government policy in the field of the development of talent contributes to the recognition of Olympiad achievements in the process of university applications. For instance, recipients of diplomas of the final stage of the All-Russian School Olympiad are entitled to a university place on a course relevant to the subject area. Numerous other Olympiads and intellectual competitions from a list compiled by the Ministry of Science and Education also qualify their winners for preferential university admission. The selection rounds of popular competitions like “Highest Standard” and “Conquer the Sparrow Hills” can compete even with the All-Russian Olympiad in terms of the number of participants. Cases where all state-funded places on a specific course go to Olympiad winners before the normal selection procedure can even start are not uncommon, and as a result, planning an individual

educational trajectory can no longer be limited to preparation for the Unified State Exam.

In responding to the challenges of modern education, regional education authorities cannot stand by without providing school teachers with methodological support. We believe that cooperation between higher education institutions, extracurricular education centres and the school itself is vital for Olympiad preparation. An individual school teacher can successfully prepare their students for subject Olympiads through to the final stage if an appropriate system of professional retraining is created.

CONCLUSION

The authors of the report “Universal competencies and new literacy: from slogans to reality”, published in 2020, believe it makes most sense to highlight 3 broad areas; – the competence of thinking; – the competence of interacting with other people; – the competence of interacting with oneself. Conceptually, we agree with the authors of the report, but we continue to use the term “competencies” as the generally accepted one in order to avoid any misunderstanding. A pre-requisite of participation in the Olympiad movement is the ability to apply subject knowledge in practice. The unique features of the Olympiad tasks are their unconventionality and complexity, which is particularly well illustrated by tasks that include logic puzzles. The challenge placed before the modern school is to produce a prize-winner or winner of the All-Russian School Olympiad – but is the school ready to take a holistic approach to the education of the student as an individual? In our opinion, yes; however, for the educational process to be fit for this purpose, it is vital to define a clear curriculum that makes use of up-to-date textbooks, as well as shift to placing more emphasis on universal competencies rather than relying solely on the development of communicative competence.

Let us consider these concepts in more detail. The competence of thinking includes the ability to think flexibly; creatively; critically; analyse cause-and-effect relationships;

draw conclusions from, in addition to explicitly stated information, the general tone of the text, hints and allusions, and irony or sarcasm of the speaker. In essence, this stems from maturity of thinking, preparedness to analyse oral and written texts, identify contradictions and similarities, and independently classify and systematise information. Faced with the challenges the tasks of the Olympiad pose, students have to rapidly adapt to an unfamiliar environment and mobilise all their intellectual resources. It is impossible to successfully complete Olympiad tasks without fully concentrating on them, mentally performing various operations with the information received from the source material, comparing ideas and establishing their relation to an extract of the text. In principle, all reading and listening tasks are based on one single approach – establishing the truth or falsity of a statement by way of comparison of the statements in the task with those in the texts. Time constraints play into the difficulty of the tasks themselves, creating a stressful situation that imposes additional obstacles. Creative tasks and logic puzzles require no less concentration from the students, but added to this are the necessity for creative thinking and abstract mental modelling. In this case, language riddles are no different from mathematic problems; words in the former play the same role as numbers in the latter, and the difference lies only in methodological approaches to Olympiad preparation and choice of language tools. To win the Olympiad in computer science, students need to be competent in programming languages; to win the Olympiad in English, they need to have mastered communicative competence, as well as to have a solid footing in vocabulary and grammar, to understand the differences between functional genres, and, most importantly, to be able to apply this knowledge in the Olympiad, using the thinking competence. The competence of interacting with other people and the competence of interacting with oneself can be applied to both to the behaviour of schoolchildren during the Olympiad and to the sphere of preparation for the Olympiad. It is impos-

sible to completely independently learn the language, learn to write texts and speak fluent correct English. All of this, in addition to independent study, involves communication with the teacher and classmates. Participation in the Olympiad movement entails studying at school, attending Olympiad study groups, participating in Olympiad 'boot camps', and being involved in the social life of the Olympiads. Again, the speaking competition is never limited to a monologue; it always involves an element of dialogue, and therefore the ability to come into contact with strangers, ask questions, clarify information, and convince others of one's point of view all belong to the competence of interaction with people.

Returning to the issue of the competence of interacting with oneself, we remind the reader that the ability to organise their educational process and deal with stress whilst taking care of their physical and mental well-being is the single most important skill for school students. Given the explicit and implicit language requirements of the Olympiad, including C1 proficiency at a minimum, an Olympiad diploma winner can be described as a specialist in their field. In our opinion, in addition to the language, speech, and socio-cultural competences per se, it is important for the teacher to pay due attention to the universal competencies, which will serve as a basis for mastering the school curriculum and beyond, as well as lay a foundation for strong performance at the Olympiad itself. Recall that among the main objectives of subject Olympiads as a youth movement is the creative development of the individual. In recent years, there has been an alarming increase in interest in the Olympiad motivated solely by the prospect of earning a monetary prize and/or a place at university, which is linked to a change in priorities among young people. However, in our opinion, victory in the final stage of the Olympiad is impossible without full immersion in one's subject and self-development. Winners of the English Olympiad, for instance, are well-equipped to continue their study of the language at university level, but equally to easily pass international academic exams at C1 and

C2 levels. Note that not all participants achieve the same results at the Olympiad, but the very experience of in-depth Olympiad preparation leaves its mark on the lives of the children, no matter the competition outcome. In today's educational system, a large number of Olympiads in English are on offer, including those held by the top Russian universities. University competitions such as "Highest standard", "Conquer the Sparrow Hills", entrance exams at MGIMO and Moscow State University, and the RANHIGS and MGLU Olympiads attract the attention of high-flyers. Considering that for many of them English is a means of learning other subjects and an open door to other cultures, comprehensive language training and strong performance even at the regional stage allow them to excel in the Unified State Exam and secure a place at their dream university.

As part of our training programme for students at the Centre for Pedagogical Excellence in Moscow, we developed and tested the textbook *Great Lengths*¹, which was eventually published by Pearson. Our empirical experience in the field of the development of universal competencies is reflected in the structure and the task content of the textbook.

Our empirical experience in coaching students attending in Moscow schools allows us to verify our hypothesis that it is universal competencies that play a key role for participants in the Olympiad movement. Members of the Moscow city team deliver a strong performance at the final stage of the All-Russian School Olympiad every year, bringing home about 50% of the total number of diplomas. We are convinced that our experience in preparing for the Olympiad can be replicated in any region of Russia, both at centres for extracurricular education and within the framework of the school course.

¹ Приказ Министерства науки и высшего образования Российской Федерации от 31.08.2021 №804 «Об утверждении перечня олимпиад школьников и их уровней на 2021/22 учебный год». URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru> (дата обращения: 14.11.2021).

The Olympiad movement in the country is becoming the main driving force behind the development of talent, pushing aside the commercial projects of private institutions. Participation in the Olympiad is free and voluntary, which ensures equal access for children from any background across the country. The state educational policy encourages higher education institutions to develop their own Olympiad projects, which is testament to the level of govern-

ment support for gifted children throughout the country. The development of universal competencies generally plays an important role for the formation of the child's personality, no matter what field of study they ultimately choose. The ability to think critically and creatively, set clear goals and master time management and planning are key to success in higher education.

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