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Foreign Teaching Experience Addressing Literacy Deficiency in the ICT Era

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Abstract

The last decade witnessed a decline in the level of reading literacy among Russian students according to the result of the PISA International study. World social changes of 2021 stipulate new approaches to functional literacy, require the modernization of both pedagogical activities and the development of a long-term educational strategy. International pedagogical experience demonstrates a significant role of non-profit literacy organizations that provide online resources for students and schoolteachers. The purpose of the study is to reveal specific features and functions of literacy organizations in the UK, the USA, and Australia. In this paper, the authors explore the possibility of subsequent implementation of relevant foreign experience in Russia to increase the level of students' functional literacy. The study is based on the data obtained in foreign methodological and pedagogical sources. The leading approaches include systematic and comparative analysis, methods of definition and classification. The results of this study can be further used for the development of a non-profit literacy organization with the purpose of functional literacy improvement of school students in Russia. The materials of the article will be useful for researchers of foreign pedagogics, educators and schoolteachers, extra-curriculum courses developers.

Keywords: education, literacy, functional literacy, literacy organizations, non-profit organizations.

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Introduction

Schoolteachers and educators from the USA and the UK are concerned with the problem of the decrease in the number of reading youth in modern society and the increase in the number of students who are not interested in reading and, moreover, experience significant difficulties in reading and understanding texts (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2020; Twenge, Martin, & Spitzberg, 2019) In an attempt to combat this negative trend, numerous non-profit literacy organizations of different scales regularly conduct scientific research and provide qualified help for teachers, parents, and children. Annual reports from non-profit literacy organizations posted on the official web-sites in the USA, the UK, and Australia prove the effectiveness of programs they launch to improve literacy in schoolchildren. For example, the latest report of Reading is Fundamental, the oldest US literacy non-profit organization, states that in 2020, they managed to reach almost 29 million of children throughout US, distributed almost 2 million books, and shared more than 5 million resources (Reading is Fundamental, 2021). Unfortunately, charity literacy organizations are almost not represented in Russia, and therefore, due attention is not paid to the study of the issue of functional literacy among schoolchildren and teenagers. For example, in Russia, since 2001, there have been no recent statistics on youth reading (Buksha, 2021).

The results of the latest PISA-2018 study, presented in Table 1 below revealed that 22% of Russian fifteen-year-old students did not even reach the minimum threshold for reading literacy, and only 5% of students were able to confirm a high level of reading literacy. At the same time, 14% of the USA students, 13% of students in Australia, and 11% of students in the UK confirmed a top level of reading literacy (OECD, 2019b). In other words, the number of students in Russia, who could comprehend the text completely, is two times lower than that in the UK and almost three times lower than that in the United States. Taking these statistics into account, it was decided to analyze the largest and most influential literacy organizations functioning in the USA, Australia, and the UK in order to facilitate the adoption of the positive experience applicable to the Russian realities.

Table 1. Proficiency level in reading.

	Russia	the USA	the UK	Australia
The mean score in reading	479	505	504	503
% of students, who attained at least Level 2 proficiency in reading	78	81	83	80
% of top performers (Level 5-6)	5%	14%	11%	13%

Purpose and objectives of the study

The rationale of the study is that low PISA results in reading literacy in Russia are caused by the underdevelopment of non-profit literacy organizations, responsible for the promotion and popularization of reading literacy among students and schoolteachers.

The purpose of this study is to examine foreign literacy organizations that provide online resources for students and schoolteachers training in the UK, Australia, and the USA to select the most successful practices that could be applied in Russia.

Literature review

According to Conrardy (2021), today, about ten million non-profit organizations (NPOs) operate around the globe. The number of NPOs grows rapidly all over the world. For example in the USA, there were 12,000 registered non-profits in 1940, and there are over 1.5 million NPOs today according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS Project Team, 2020). There are about 0.5 million of NPOs in the UK, of which charities represent about 80% (Charity excellence framework, n.d.), Australia's non-profit sector has more than 0.6 million organizations (Philanthropy Australia, n.d.).

In comparison with the above countries, Russia lags significantly behind in the number of organizations. There are only about 220 thousand of NPOs in Russia at the moment. Besides, they make less impact due to low fundraising. Comparing the biggest NPOs of the USA and Russia, it was revealed that the USA's United Way Worldwide states the total revenue equal to 4.052 billion dollars, while Russian Gift of Life states about 23.7 million dollars that is approximately 170 times less.

It is impossible to accurately count organizations that deal with literacy and education in the USA, the UK, and Australia due to their large number and constant emergence of new charities, but it should be noted that there are numerous web charity navigators, that provide a list of organizations based on the location and cause areas. For example, VolunteerMatch (n.d.) navigator shows 40382 NPOs working in the field of literacy and education in the USA. At the same time, in Russia, there are about 70 charitable foundations in the field of education, culture and arts that reward young talented people with grants (Moscow State Institute of Culture, 2021).

As for organizations directly involved in children's literacy, there are only a few of them. They collect donations for the subsequent purchase of books for visually impaired children or orphans.

According to the latest statistics, in the USA, the majority of charitable money was allocated to religion (29%), education (14%), human services (12%), grantmaking foundations (12%), and health (9%). In Russia, charity is strongly associated with helping ill people and children in particular. Furthermore, scientific research, women's rights and educational access for vulnerable children and young people are least supported through volunteering in Russia (1%) (CAF, 2019). This clearly shows the lack of attention to education and literacy matters in Russia.

The reason that partly explains the unpopularity of charitable foundations in Russia is a well-grounded distrust of citizens in how money is allocated (Kholostykh, 2017). However, at the same time, there are some local initiatives that deal with literacy and reading issues. For example, in Kazan, the Happy Stories charitable foundation implements several programs such as a Literary Camp, Reading stories to children from special schools, a Literary Club (Charitable Foundation "Happy Stories", n.d.)

Nevertheless, in comparison with foreign organizations, Russian organizations have a much narrower range of activities. Literacy organizations in the UK, the USA, and Australia are responsible for teacher training and briefing into the latest research findings about teaching reading. Also, in the USA, all teachers are obliged at the legislative level to take two weeks of professional development on evidence-based reading instruction and pass a test on the teaching reading basics (Gewertz, 2021). The National Reading Panel concludes that appropriate teacher education contributes to the higher achievement of students (Giacoaia, Taylor-Zapata, & Zajicek, 2012). Therefore, the issue of developing students' reading literacy should begin with teacher training as success depends mostly on the quality of the instruction given.

Moreover, these organizations design relevant online reading materials jointly with newspapers for school children, graded by age and language proficiency. In the UK, the USA, and Australia, schoolchildren are recognized as full members of society and Internet users. Therefore, many newspapers have an online adapted version of news bulletins for schoolchildren of different ages, which are accompanied by explanatory comments, audio, video, and interesting practice-oriented tasks. The real news is offered as the materials for developing critical thinking, reading fluency, and functional literacy.

The concept of functional literacy was first used at the World Congress of Ministers of Education in Tehran in 1965 (U.S. Cong., 1966), and today, it is defined by UNESCO as "the capacity of a person to engage in all the activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development" (UNESCO, 2020).

Drawing on this definition, it may be concluded that functional literacy plays an essential role in the development of a person who intends to participate efficiently in social processes.

In 2000, the first PISA study was conducted which measured functional literacy in 15-year-olds from 32 countries (OECD, 2000). Since then, all OECD members have relied on the statistics of this study to determine the level of functional literacy. One of the main components of functional literacy is reading literacy. Reading literacy is defined in PISA as “the ability to understand, use, and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society” (OECD, 2019a, p. 22).

The PISA 2018 framework (OECD, 2019b) defines four skills that constitute reading literacy:

- 1) Locating information. This falls into two more specific skills: 1) scanning and locating where readers need to scan only a single piece of text to elicit some facts; 2) searching for and selecting relevant text where readers need to select an appropriate text from several passages.
- 2) Understanding. This includes: 1) representing literal meaning that lies in paraphrasing sentences; 2) integrating and generating inferences that build connections across several texts.
- 3) Evaluating and reflecting. It is the highest-level skill that consists of the following elements: 1) assessing quality and credibility; inquires the analysis of the reliability of the source and competency and intentions of the author; 2) reflecting on content and form, where readers evaluate the style of the text; 3) corroborating and handling conflicts which implies finding contradictions in the text and managing them.
- 4) Reading fluently. It is the ability to read well, to read “as you speak”. It is the focal concept when components of reading are concerned.

According to Rasinski & Padak (2012, p.3), reading fluency is “an ability to read accurately, quickly, expressively, with good phrasing, and with good comprehension”. Hudson, Lane, & Pullen (2005, p.702) state that “reading fluency is made up of at least three key elements: accurate reading of the connected text at a conversational rate with appropriate prosody or expression”. The authors emphasized that students who do not succeed at least in one of these aforementioned components can be referred to as non-fluent readers. Both definitions express similar ideas and name three main components of reading fluency: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody.

The head of PISA Andreas Schleicher states that “effective strategies and tools for developing 21st-century literacy skills exist, and countries as different as China or Singapore in Asia, Estonia or Ireland in Europe, or Canada in North America show that school systems can provide those skills effectively” (Schleicher, 2020, p.1). Thus, this paper aims to analyze the core aspects of organizations focusing on literacy development in the USA, The UK, and Australia for the purpose of further implementation of successful practices in the Russian educational environment.

Methodology

In this study, we compared and contrasted the main aspects of activities of the biggest literacy organizations in the UK, Australia, and the USA that are dealing with children literacy in particular. The organizations were chosen by the annual revenue and the impact they make. In this study, the two largest organizations in each of the studied countries were analyzed. They are Reading is Fundamental and Reading Rockets in the USA; The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) and National Literacy Trust in the UK; The Australian Literacy Educators’ Association and The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation in Australia. Besides, all above-mentioned literacy NPOs cooperate with newspapers, which is why child-friendly newspapers will be also analyzed in the study.

Results

The qualitative research analysis revealed that all studied organizations perform similar functions:

- have websites that offer a paid membership for extended access for teachers and educators. Nevertheless, free versions also share abundant resources such as classroom materials, lesson plans, challenges, projects;
- publish useful articles, materials, courses, and develop online applications that are predominantly free for parents and their children;
- collect donations to improve literacy and numeracy skills in the most disadvantaged communities.
- deliver the latest evidence-based research to teachers thus, bridging the gap between theoretical findings and practical work;
- carry out research and support researchers who study literacy and communication issues;

- design CPD programs for teachers, encourage communication and experience exchange via online Zoom meetings, publish video and audio podcasts and articles about teaching reading;
- collaborate with football stars, movie stars, and writers to increase the prestige of reading among young people;
- collaborate with newspapers and book publishers to provide children's reading materials to those in need.

However, it is important to mention some distinctive or advanced features of these organizations.

“Reading is Fundamental” (RIF) founded in 1966, is the oldest and largest children and families` nonprofit literacy organization in the United States. RIF offers an indispensable tool for the reading grade level identification and further progress tracking called “Literacy tracker”. Every teacher can create a group for schoolchildren and see the reading rate per minute, words, schoolchildren stumble at, and check their progress and share the results with parents. Besides, there is one of the most impactful driving evidence-based programmes in RIF called “Read for Success”; its goal is to combat summer learning slide in schoolchildren. Another outstanding programme is called Skybrary. It is an interactive library, designed as a colourful online application that provides access to nearly 1000 digital books with read-to-me narration and animation for children aged from 4 to 9 (Skybrary, n.d.).

Reading Rockets is a national public media literacy initiated by WETA, the public television and radio station in the USA`s capital. Launched in 2001, the website offers information and resources on how young kids learn to read, why so many of them struggle, and how adults can help. The website offers a Book Finder tool to create a customized list of fiction and non-fiction books searching by author, illustrator, age, reading level, genre, format, and topic (Book Finder, n.d.). Another useful feature that promotes creativity, collaboration, communication and critical thinking is called “Reading Adventure Pack”. The Packs are divided into topics, and each of them contains:

- 1) Instructions about how to use the packet;
- 2) Two books: one fiction and one nonfiction;
- 3) Creativity Activity: a hands-on craft project;
- 4) Imagination Activity: encourages imaginative play, writing, or drawing;

- 5) Get Real Activity: focuses on real-world experiences for parents and children;
- 6) Bookmark: lists the featured titles and alternative titles (Reading Adventure Packs for Families, 2020).

Reading Rockets possesses more than 50 expert webcasts that can be used as the centerpiece of teaching staff development workshops. Each of them features a 45- or 60-minute video program that includes recommended readings and suggested discussion questions. Some webcasts include the presenters' PowerPoint slides. Besides, everyone is invited to participate in the free course "Reading 101: A Guide to Teaching Reading and Writing". The course consists of nine modules which include in-depth information, classroom strategies, assignments, and additional resources on the building blocks of teaching reading and writing – including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Reading rockets, 2021).

The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) recently released a declaration called "Literacy in 21st century Australia" that brings the best literacy practices for the classroom together. This document is in the public domain and may be downloaded (Australian Literacy Educators' Association, n.d.).

The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation has launched a programme StoryKids, that gathers stories written by kids and broadcasts them in a podcast format, read by famous people (StoryKids x ALNF, n.d.).

One of the most famous UK literacy organizations is The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) which is a registered charity that was founded in 1963. UKLA organizes book awards for children's books that are judged by teachers.

A more recent but no less significant organization is called National Literacy Trust (NLT) – which is an independent UK charity that is dedicated to giving disadvantaged children the necessary literacy skills. The Guardian Foundation, the PSHE Association, together with NLT have created a collaborative project NewsWise that aims to raise the literacy level of schoolchildren by teaching critical thinking through reading, analyzing, editing, and reporting real news articles. The mission of this project is to develop the critical literacy skills of schoolchildren by raising awareness of how to distinguish fake news from real ones. NewsWise helps teachers empower schoolchildren to access, understand, analyze, and participate in the news by providing high quality free of charge teacher training that lets teachers turn a classroom into a newsroom (NewsWise, n.d.).

All of the above-analyzed organizations cooperate with newspapers and news portals that publish child-friendly news. Below is the list of reliable sources from where the articles can be taken for both extensive reading and for studying in the classroom:

Table 2. News article resources.

the UK resources	the USA resources	Australia resources
BBC Newsround	News for Kids	KidsNews
BBC What's New?	Dogonews	Crinkling News
The Day	Inside Science	ABC News Education
First News Live	Kids Post	Behind the News
Twig Science Reporter	Scholastic Kids Press	
Tuesday News Day	Teaching Kids News	
Twinkl NewsRoom	Teen Kids News	
The Week Junior	Time for Kids	

According to the research results, the main features of the news articles for schoolchildren are as follows:

- have the Fake News section that teaches children to differentiate between reliable and biased news; thus, training evaluating and reflecting;
- have comprehension questions below the article for training understanding and locating information;
- are supplemented with audio and video versions of the articles for modelling correct pronunciation and expression to develop reading fluency;
- are additionally supplemented with post-reading project-based and task-based activities, close to real-life situations, which makes these tasks significant for functional literacy development.

All the features mentioned, made it possible to conclude that such news articles completely comply with the PISA requirements for developing reading literacy and can be used for PISA preparation.

Summarizing the information about the abovementioned areas of work of foreign literacy NPOs, it can be concluded that their versatile projects contribute to the maintenance and improvement of reading literacy in schoolchildren.

Discussion

Unlike foreign countries in question, the literacy programs for schoolchildren are almost not represented in Russia. Nevertheless, this is of primary importance to provide children with educational online resources, since schoolchildren spend a lot of their free time on the Internet. Creating a literacy non-profit that would promote reading, providing free online resources, such as news, podcasts, videos for school children and materials for teachers' professional development, could improve reading proficiency in Russia, if it was a state initiative, that would engage celebrities as audio or video hosts, likewise, they do it abroad.

Having analyzed the main directions of organizations aimed at literacy development in the United States, the UK, and Australia, the following conclusions were drawn. First, in Russia, it is necessary to create a literacy NPO that raises the prestige of reading and literacy in Russia using the strategies of the foreign organizations that have tangible results and scientifically justified evidence-based effectiveness. Second, it is important to launch a website of a literacy NPO with the latest updates of existing foreign and local studies, links to foreign online professional development teacher webinars that will be viewed and discussed by teachers, taken into consideration and put into action. Third, it is essential to upload materials for schoolchildren on the official website of the organization that would empower literacy, reading fluency and global awareness through current events such as child-friendly podcasts, news, stories ranked by age and complexity. The website should be accessible for parents to find articles and resources about how to instill love for reading in children. The website should transparently represent the annual reports with the money raised and the impact made. Then, since the creation of a literacy organization at the all-Russian level implies financial investments, it is possible to narrow the scope of a non-profit to an intra-school organization by borrowing existing foreign materials. Finally, all free resources that are available on the websites of foreign literacy organizations may be used during English lessons in Russia.

Conclusion

Thus, NPOs working on literacy issues increase the overall level of teachers' qualifications and schoolchildren's level of reading literacy by launching programmes and by providing training materials for both teachers and students. Therefore, creating a literacy charity in Russia, based on the features of foreign non-profits, described in the article, can help to improve the results in reading literacy in Russian school children.

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