A ROAD TO SUCCESS IN LANGUAGE OLYMPIADS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF EFL OLYMPIAD TASKS IN RUSSIA FROM INCEPTION TO 2023

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Abstract: Language Olympiads have been effectively used by Russian universities for enrollment purposes for years. Consequently, secondary and high school students are often coached to participate in these Olympiads to improve their chances of university admission. This research aims to trace the development and transformation of tasks used in EFL Olympiads over the past decade to identify the most common types, thereby providing school English language teachers with a clear framework to better prepare students for these competitions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze past Olympiad papers from 2015 to 2023. An in-depth analysis of the tasks in top language Olympiads revealed the predominance of tasks focusing on receptive skills, integrated skills, and cultural knowledge, in contrast to those assessing productive and creative skills. While tasks aimed at evaluating productive skills are largely absent in the elimination rounds, they account for more than 50% of the total score in the final rounds. Speaking tasks for secondary and high school students are minimally represented among the Olympiad tasks. Additionally, there is a noticeable trend toward assessing participants' knowledge of the history, literature, and culture of English-speaking countries, both directly and indirectly, while testing both receptive and productive skills. Moreover, tasks assessing integrated skills, which were previously the least common, are now gaining prominence. The findings suggest that preparation should focus more on skill development rather than on individual tasks. This shift would facilitate simultaneous preparation for multiple EFL Olympiads and improve students' performance in the short term. This study also contributes to the field of professional discourse and the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by highlighting how the evolving nature of EFL Olympiad tasks can inform the development of targeted ESP curricula that better align with the communicative and cultural competencies required in academic and professional spheres.

Keywords: Language Olympiads, EFL teaching, task formats, exam preparation, skill acquisition, Bloom's taxonomy, alternative assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Russian education boasts its school Olympiads in a variety of subjects. There is no denying that those are excellent springboards for both secondary and high school students on their way to success. Not only do they prepare students for future challenges of University life, but they also guarantee the enrollees a place at the University of their choice in case of their exceptional performance in a specialised Olympiad (Federal'nyi zakon ot 29 dekabrya 2012 g. N 273-FZ "Ob obrazovanii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii", 2012).

Language Olympiads have always had a special place in the system of alternative non-traditional forms of assessment in Russia. They have been used as a method to recognise talent and outstanding abilities in young children for many decades (Kurasovskaya & Makhmuryan, 2018; Bolshakova, 2015). Now, more than ever before, due to the development of technology (and the impact of COVID-19 on the educational processes) and boost of distance and blended learning, participation in the language Olympiads has become accessible to children virtually in all regions, which allows the major universities in Russia to gain an insight into a broad cross-section of the young talents. As a result, universities can secure a diversity of applicants who show consistently high proficiency levels and engagement in educational programmes – a win-win situation for both sides.

The history of language Olympiads in Russia spans several decades, over which this alternative assessment of language proficiency has undergone significant transformation. Traditionally, initiated by language departments of established and well-esteemed universities, they served as a feat aimed at challenging potential enrollees in their programmes. Thus, the universities undertook the responsibilities of test development as they saw fit to meet the requirements of the curriculum. According to Gulov (2023, p.122), language Olympiads have turned into an alternative system of assessing the knowledge and abilities of schoolchildren which exists in parallel with the system of unified state exams.

Most language Olympiads vary in the task types, level of creativity, number of preliminary stages, and age groups of the test takers. This wide disparity might make the test challenging in terms of preparation and, thus, might deter both teachers and their students from embarking on the way to taking part in any Olympiad. One of the approaches to promote the accessibility of language contests might be to analyse the questions in past papers and demo versions of Olympiads available online. However, identifying a common denominator of those task types is an absolute imperative in developing a solid preparatory system for the potential Olympiad participants. This background work ensures that test takers can measure the amount of effort required to surmount each test type and thus alleviate the concerns of the parties involved.

Thus, the aim of this article is to shed light on the evolution of the task types used in EFL Olympiads, to explain the possible rationale behind the changes, and to highlight the most common tasks used to facilitate the work of a teacher.

Although students have ample information and access to resources to prepare for the competitions autonomously, they might lack external support and guidance through the abundance of information on offer.

One of the principles of exam preparation is the use of past papers and practice tests that might take up a significant proportion of the course time. When teachers aspire to prepare their students for a language Olympiad, they might review past papers and specific task types. However, it is not always possible to dwell on this for long due to the time constraints of the course. This idea generally concurs with other researchers' views (May, 1996; Umuerhi & Urheiwhu, 2023) that the overuse of practice tests contributes little to language development.

Another shortcoming of these papers as a primary ground for preparation is that they limit students' knowledge and language skills to a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, the context of a language contest might require them to tackle problems beyond the scope they handled in a preparation class (May, 1996; Kurasovskaya, 2013; Agakhanov & Marchukova, 2022), which means that it is not always possible to expand vocabulary resources through intensive exam practice alone or expose students to a vast variety of cultural aspects of the English-speaking countries. Bolshakova (2015) also maintains that Olympiads as an alternative type of language assessment require a significantly higher level of cognition and creativity than more traditional types of testing or examination.

On the other hand, students might expect to work on tasks that are similar to those covered in an Olympiad; otherwise, it might have low face validity if students do not think they will meet the same kind of tasks in the exam or in their academic studies (Harmer, 2007). Thus, it is suggested that students might need to obtain insights into the idiosyncratic nature of the language with its culturally conditioned constraints (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Coombe & Hubley, 2009).

Therefore, the course aimed at preparing school students for the language Olympiad should consider the balanced development of skills as well as work on grammar and lexis rather than expect improvement from copious mock tests and past papers. Moreover, impossible as it may seem at first glance, it is feasible to use the same content to get ready for several language Olympiads simultaneously, as they use a very similar array of activities and tend to check a comparable set of skills and grammatical and lexical structures through homogeneous topics.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

To prove the point mentioned in the previous section, the authors have analysed the past papers of the top English language Olympiads from 2015 to 2023. The study used theoretical methods such as analysis of scientific and methodological literature on the topic including but not limited to documents on education and normative materials on education. Empirical methods include qualitative and quantitative methods. The former were used to analyse the topics of the tasks, lexical and grammatical structures tested, and the format of the tasks; the latter were employed to compare and contrast the number of specific tasks used in Olympiads as well as to pinpoint the most frequently used ones. The in-depth analysis of the types of tasks allowed us to identify the most common features the tasks display and to highlight the current precedence of receptive skills, integrated skills, and cultural knowledge checking questions over productive and creative skills.

2.1. Research Background

It is undeniable that Olympiads, as a type of competition, lay the groundwork for future success. The ability of adolescents to generate ingenious decisions and think outside the box might help them in the future to manage the unknown – the skill that is acquired over a span of time and with sufficient effort on their side. Being perhaps the first competition in their lives, it is hardly the last one.

Thus, it is the work of a teacher to help their students overcome the difficulties with the least effort applied, especially for high school students who feel pressure mounting in their last three school years (Smagulov & Smagulov, 2018) when they are supposed to prepare for their final examination. This challenge should encourage teachers to generate an ultimate solution that would develop fundamental skills rather than tackle a specific task type. Having developed the skills necessary to deal with a variety of tasks that fall into a particular category, students will be able to handle the types of tasks that they did not consider during the preparation stage.

We suggest that teachers should teach their students skills within the following categories:
- Reading: macro and micro reading skills;
- Listening skills;
- UoE (Use of English): grammar and vocabulary;
- Writing: process and product writing;
- Speaking: discourse management and language.

Moreover, teachers are also accountable for the cultural proficiency of their students and should highlight the importance of being well-versed in the past and present socio-cultural milieu of the country/countries where the language is official and widely spread. The initial introduction to the culture could be implemented through the exposure of the students to audio or written texts on a variety of topics that might constitute the scope of areas presented in a language Olympiad. Such texts could lay an excellent foundation for the language study where students could notice grammatical structures or the range of vocabulary which could be later deployed in either speaking or writing tasks on similar topics.

2.2. Top Language Olympiads

This section will discuss the major EFL Olympiads for Russian secondary and high school students. Over the last decade, more than a dozen universities around Russia have created and conducted Olympiads in the English language for secondary and high school students. They also applied to the Russian Council on Olympiads (RCO) at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation to get credited with one level. The higher the level of the Olympiad, the higher the number of universities throughout the country that will enrol those showing exceptional performance. The first statement issued by the RCO in 2013 (Prikaz Ministerstva obrazovaniya i nauki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Minobrnauki Rossii) ot 30 dekabrya 2013 g. № 1421 Ob utverzhdenii Perechnya olimpiad shkol'nikov na 2013/14 uchebnyi god, 2013) had only 10 EFL Olympiads with no levels assigned. The last one, issued in August 2022 (Prikaz Ministerstva obrazovaniya i nauki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Minobrnauki Rossii) ot 30 avgusta 2022 g. № 828 Ob utverzhdenii perechnya olimpiad shkol'nikov i ikh urovnei na 2022/23 uchebnyi god, 2022),

contains a list of 13 Olympiads, ranging from level 1, which allows its winners to matriculate without exams, to level 3, which might give some extra points to the winners' portfolios while entering Russian universities. All in all, there are 16 EFL Olympiads in the English Language registered from 2013 to 2023:

1. The Olympiad of the Lomonosov Moscow State University and Moscow Komsomolets Publishing House, hereinafter referred to as the Sparrow Hills Olympiad or **MSU**;

2. The Olympiad of Saint Petersburg University, hereinafter referred to as the SPBU Olympiad or **SPBU**;

3. The Olympiad of the Lomonosov Moscow State University, hereinafter referred to as the Lomonosov Olympiad or **Lomonosov**;

4. The Olympiad of the Higher School of Economics, hereinafter referred to as the HSE Olympiad or **HSE**;

5. The Olympiad of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, hereinafter referred to as the RANEPA Olympiad or **RANEPA**;

6. The Olympiad of Moscow State Linguistic University, hereinafter referred to as the Eurasian Linguistic Olympiad or **ELO**;

7. The Olympiad of the Academy of Federal Security Service of RF and the Academy of Federal Protective Service, hereinafter referred to as **FSS**;

8. The Olympiad of Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, hereinafter referred to as **HSPU**;

9. The Olympiad of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, hereinafter referred to as REA Olympiad or **REA**;

10. The Olympiad of Chelyabinsk State University, hereinafter referred to as **CSU**;

11. The Olympiad of Moscow City University, hereinafter referred to as **MCU**;

12. The Olympiad of Kazan University, hereinafter referred to as **KU**;

13. The Olympiad of Peter the Great St.Petersburg Polytechnic University, the Northern Arctic Federal University and Russian Technological University, hereinafter referred to as **POLYTECH**;

14. The Olympiad of Russian State University for the Humanities, hereinafter referred to as **RSUH**;

15. The Olympiad of Moscow State Pedagogical University, hereinafter referred to as **MSPU**;

16. The Olympiad of North Caucasian Federal District, hereinafter referred to as **NCFD**.

Table 1. EFL Olympiads in Russia

Year / Olympiad	MSU	SPBU	Lomonosov	HSE	ELO	RANEPA	HSPU	MCU	RSUH	REA	FSS
2022/23	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
2021/22	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	2	2	3
2020/21	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	3	3
2019/20	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	-	-	2	2
2018/19	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	-	2	2
2017/18	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	-	2	2
2016/17	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	-	2	3
2015/16	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	3	-	3	2
2014/15	1	2	2	-	2	3	2	2	-	-	2
2013/14	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y

Numbers 1, 2, and 3 stand for the level of the Olympiad and correspond to the first (the highest), the second and the third (the lowest) ones; whereas "-" means that that year an Olympiad was not given any level; Y stands for the first time Olympiads were introduced.

There are four Olympiads (see Table 1) that have been holding the highest, first, level for more than eight years (MSU, SPBU, Lomonosov, and HSE). This study focuses on these four Olympiads in the English language together with the All-Russian Olympiad for High School students, hereinafter referred to as the All-Russian Olympiad or ARO, as the one beyond RCO levels whose winners and laureates are granted places at all Russian universities without exams.

3. STUDY AND RESULTS

The Olympiads included in the ranking and the All-Russian Olympiad were considered in terms of the seven categories of skills and knowledge attested, namely: Use of English, Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking, Phonetics and Socio-Cultural Section. Although most Olympiads do not seem to place particular importance on the order of the tasks in which they are provided to the candidates, in the study conducted, the task types were considered and ranged in the order typical of the international language exams. Thus, it is clear which aspects were played down and which gained greater status through the years 2015/2016-2022/2023 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Skills tested in EFL Olympiads

Skills tested / Olympiad	ARO		MSU		SPBU		Lo monosov		HSE	
	E	F	E	F	E	F	E	F	E	F
UoE	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	¢
Reading	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	¢
Listening	+	+	¢	+			+	¢		+
Writing	+	+		+		+	+	+		+
Speaking	+	+								
Phonetics					¢	¢			+	
Culture Studies	+	+	¢	+	¢	+	¢	+	+	+
Integrated skills tasks		+		+		+	+	+		+
E	Elimination round									
F	Final round									
+	Explicitly present									
¢	Are either implicitly given or were taken out in recent years									

3.1. Receptive skills

What stands out from the data (Table 2) is that receptive skills come into play as a principal focus. The "Use of English" (hereinafter referred to as UoE) type of task is given particular prominence. The Use of English section of all the competitions was of major importance in both rounds. This section primarily focuses on the knowledge of lexis, idiomatic language (formulaic), word formation, and grammatical structures in the English language. The Olympiads of all ranks employed these task types in their tests for secondary and high school students of every age category.

3.1.1. Use of English and Phonetics

The analysis of the Use of English section of the Olympiads in question has shown that there are some areas that tend to receive more attention than others. So to speak, knowledge of verbs, syntactic constructions, and an array of assorted constructions, including emphatic ones, is part and parcel of every single year. Whereas, understanding the difference in meaning and general use of nouns, pronouns, adverbs, a variety of clauses, and cross-language interference is checked from time to time. The least assessed category is adjectives, probably due to the fact that it is difficult to come up with a row of four similar yet different adjectives to create a multiple-choice item with only one correct answer. To get a better understanding of what is tested in each subsection of the Use of English section, see Table 3.

Table 3. Use of English

Grammar / Olympiad	ARO	MSU	SPBU	Lomonosov	HSE
VERB — **Verb tenses and verb forms**	+	+	+	+	+
Passive voice	+	+	+	+	+
Narrative tenses (including Pr.P and Pt.P)	+	+	+	+	+
Indicative and subjunctive mood	+		+	+	+
Present Continuous (including for expressing annoyance)	+			+	+
Future in the Past	+		+	+	
Reported speech	+	+			+
Conditionals (mostly unreal and mixed)	+		+	+	
Imperative				+	
Verb form coordination	+				
used to, would to express habits	+				
Modal verbs (mostly in past tenses and with different registers)	+	+	+		+
Finite or non-finite forms *(infinitive, perfect infinitive, infinitive of purpose, gerund, participle)*	+		+	+	
Infinitives (Perfect infinitive, infinitive of purpose *so as to, in order to*)	+		+	+	
Finite or non-finite forms			+	+	
Participle clauses	+				
Verb patterns (Phrasal verbs)		+	+	+	+
NOUNS & PRONOUNS — **Nouns**	+	+	+	+	+
countable/mass nouns	+				+
Articles		+	+		+
plural forms of nouns			+	+	
compound nouns	+				
comparative structures (*the more the better, few/less*)	+		+		+
adjectives (*-ing/-ed*)					
Pronouns (*some, none, any, nobody...*)			+	+	
CLAUSES — **Clauses**	+			+	+
Relative clauses	+				
concessive clauses (*in spite of, despite*)	+			+	
were to do in subordinate clauses					+
Reduced relative clauses	+				
Complex object	+		+		

		1	2	3	4	5
SYNTAX	**Syntax**	+	+	+	+	+
	Word order				+	+
	Tag questions			+		
	Wh-questions	+				
	Punctuation		+			
CONSTRUCTIONS	**An array of different constructions**	+	+	+	+	+
	I wish construction	+	+	+		+
	have smth done constructions	+			+	
	either...or, neither...nor			+		
	I'd rather	+				
	if only					+
	if I were to ...			+		
	be due to construction	+				
	get used + ing		+			
	Emphatic constructions	+				+
	inversion	+				+
	cleft sentences	+				+
MISCELLANEOUS	**Cross-language interference**	+	+			+
	Time adverbials	+	+	+		
	Adjectives	+				+

As for the tasks used in this section, a certain pattern emerges. Contestants need strong English skills to advance and excel in the Olympiads, whether in the preliminary or final stages. However, some tasks are more commonly used in the elimination round, such as:

- clozes in which students match words/expressions with gaps and there is more than one plausible distractor (Lomonosov, HSE);
- multiple choice clozes on the sentence and text levels when candidates are asked to fill in the gap with an expression or even a sentence instead of a single word (ARO, SPBU);
- sentence construction tasks or jumbled sentences (HSE);
- multiple matching checking formulaic language (MSU).

Even though some tasks are only employed in the final rounds, to check candidates' language ability, all Olympiads use gap-filling exercises as well as multiple choice cloze tests. The number and variety of tasks in the Use of English section soar in the final round of the Olympiads, as some students struggle to give correct answers without consulting dictionaries or other resources, which, together with the variety of idioms checked, rapidly increases the level of cognitive difficulty of the tasks. According to Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Koksal & Ulum, 2018) of Educational Objectives (Table 4), the most complicated tasks are the ones that require abilities to analyze and evaluate an existing piece of work as well as to produce something completely new.

Table 4. Tasks in EFL Olympiads and Bloom's Taxonomy

	Bloom's Level	**Explanation**	**Verbs**	**EFL Tasks**
6	**Create**	Put information together in an original way	write, formulate	Keywords transformation
5	**Evaluate**	Pass judgements on the basis of particular guidelines	select, support	Multiple Choice Cloze, Error Correction, Cloze (Gap Filling)
4	**Analyse**	Split a concept into parts and draw a connection between them	compare, contrast, organise	Matching sentence halves, sentence construction

	Bloom's Level	Explanation	Verbs	EFL Tasks
3	**Apply**	Use previously gained knowledge in a new way	use, interpret, demonstrate	Sentence completion, derivatives
2	**Understand**	Comprehend what you have studied	classify, select, translate	Short answer questions
1	**Remember**	Call to mind data stored in your long-term memory	define, list, state	Definitions

Thus, such tasks as multiple choice cloze and multiple matching, which require mostly the skills of analysis and interpretation, are backed up by an array of other high-level tasks: gap filling (all five Olympiads), error correction (MSU, SPBU, Lomonosov, HSE), and transformations (ARO, HSE).

Even though short answer questions where students are expected to produce their own answer, starting with filling the gap with one word (ARO, MSU, SPBU, Lomonosov) and finishing with paraphrasing idioms (SPBU) or rewriting sentences while keeping the original meaning (HSE), are present in all five Olympiads, they intend to check low-level cognitive skills and thus are given mostly in the final rounds to diversify the general range of tasks (i.e. crossword puzzles, partial translations, images labelling) and create a positive atmosphere during the contest rather than to check knowledge of English for real.

As for phonetics, there has been a marginal shift in the representation of the tasks testing the knowledge of phonetics. While the HSE Olympiad alongside the SPBU Olympiad (until 2022) had this section in the elimination round, by the final round it was made redundant.

The overview of the tests shows that all tasks are standardised and share features of the academic discourse, which implies that they are created to test a set of high-level micro-skills necessary in academic contexts (Coombe et al., 2007), including but not limited to recognising special terms related to the topics (HSE), identifying the aim and the scope of a lecture (ARO), detecting the attitude of the speaker (ARO, HSE).

3.1.2. Listening

Only half of the Olympiads included testing of listening skills in the elimination round, whereas almost all (4 out of 5 Olympiads) had included this section in the final round before 2020. However, this number further halved by 2023, with only 2 out of 5 Olympiads employing this type of task in their final round (ARO, HSE) (see Table 2. Skills tested in EFL Olympiads).

A noteworthy detail is that the tasks represent samples of academic listening (i.e. scripted texts read by professional readers) and lack authentic features and, thus, impromptu speech (e.g., pauses, hesitations, background noises, etc.). Moreover, such listening tasks check the bottom-up processing, where students need to reconstruct the meaning of units of the language that are decoded, which leads to text comprehension. The tasks generally vary from MCQs, or Multiple Choice Questions (ARO), T/F and T/F/NS (ARO, HSE) to note taking / sentence completion (HSE).

Over the last four years, there has been a noticeable trend towards simplification of the tasks in the municipal round of the All-Russian Olympiad for the students of the 7th-8th forms. Whereas in 2019/20 and 2020/21 there were two varying tasks, they were gradually reduced to one task in the municipal round: MCQ in 2021/22 and sentence completion in 2022/23. Thus, it might be presumed that the former might be used in the next Olympiad as this type of task rules out arbitrary

decision-making for the students. The tasks in all other stages have not seen any dynamics over the last five years (T/F, MCQ); moreover, the same tasks are used for students in all grades with the only difference from 2019/20 that students of the 7th-8th forms are allowed to partake in the regional and final rounds of the competition.

A further development is also observed in the final round of the HSE Olympiad for students in grades 7-8 and 9-10. Those changes also might be classified as a simplification process towards overall standardisation. Thus, a multiple matching task in the final round for the 9th-10th grade students used in 2019 was replaced with a conventional T/F/NS task in the subsequent years. Similarly, in the last three years of competitions, a conventional sentence completion task was replaced with sentences containing factual errors, which students are supposed to replace with the correct options from the audio recording. There might be a conflicting opinion regarding that upgrade: whether it serves as scaffolding and provides a useful tip on a possible alternative, or makes the task more convoluted and hard to complete. Nevertheless, it might be assumed that this task type is here to stay, considering no further changes in this section.

3.1.3. Reading

Following this category, tasks assessing the reading skills of students came in second in popularity. All the Olympiads check reading comprehension (Table 5) during the elimination rounds, and in most cases, they use standard tasks: Multiple Choice Questions, or MCQ (ARO, MSU, SPBU, HSE until 2020), Gapped text (ARO), Jigsaw reading both on a sentence level (Lomonosov, HSE until 2020) and text level (HSE since 2020), and two texts mixed together (MSU).

Table 5. Tasks used in Reading comprehension

Reading		ARO		MSU		SPBU		Lomonosov		HSE	
tasks/rounds		E	F	E	F	E	F	E	F	E	F
Standard tasks	T/F/NS	¢	+	+		+		+	¢	¢	
	Matching		+							+	+
	MCQ	+	+	+		+				¢	
	Gapped text	+									+
	Jigsaw reading (sequencing)			+	+			+		+	
Traditional in-class tasks	Write questions based on the text				+						
	Answer the questions based on the text								+		
Integrated tasks	Integrated R&L, R&R (T/F/NS)		+							+	
	Integrated R&W (Summarise the text, Comment on the text, Write the ending of the story)				+		+	+	+		
E	Elimination round										
F	Final round										
+	Explicitly present										
¢	Were taken out in the recent years										

However, in the final round, only the All-Russian Olympiad uses such traditional tasks as T/F/NS, multiple matching, and MCQ questions to check reading comprehension. Other Olympiads either do it through gapped text (HSE) or jigsaw reading text level (MSU), or through integrated reading & listening (ARO) or reading & writing (MSU, Lomonosov, SPBU). In the final round of the HSE Olympiads, reading tasks have been given since 2021 in the Culture Studies section, and they check both reading comprehension and knowledge of culture. In terms of tasks, Olympiads tend to use the same format for years: SPBU has been using it since the beginning for both rounds; HSE had one format for both rounds before 2020 and another one after; MSU introduced minor changes in 2021; and Lomonosov only in 2023. The All-Russian Olympiad employed the IELTS reading format at the beginning (2015/2016), then shifted to the Cambridge exams, and finally developed something of its own that leaned toward the integrated reading and listening tasks in the final rounds.

The texts for the tasks tend to be taken mostly from newspapers and magazines or encyclopedia entries and popular texts about historical events, prominent figures, and cultural traditions (ARO, HSE, SPBU). Occasionally they feature extracts from literary masterpieces (e.g., *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury, *Paddington* by Michael Bond) and very rarely poems (e.g., *I'm just a stranger here, heaven is my home* by Carole Clemmons) (MSU, Lomonosov).

Reading in the linguistic Olympiads challenges students to handle language input of a higher level (L+1). Thus, competitions check whether students are able to draw inferences using language forms and unfamiliar, advanced vocabulary in the input and output. As a result, the reading section tends to include tasks where authentic texts serve as prompts for vocabulary and grammar tasks (Lomonosov, SPBU, HSE).

Reading tasks alone are expected to check the overall comprehension or the understanding of specific details or language of the text in a reading section of the competition. At this point, learners might still be developing the ability to see the patterns of cross-references in the text. Without this underlying groundwork, any further language production might be constricted. This task type is essential in bridging the gap between receptive and productive skills by employing cognition. This might provide the rationale behind the growing trend of using reading texts as a springboard for writing (MSU, SPBU, Lomonosov).

3.2. Productive skills

3.2.1. Writing

In the All-Russian Olympiad, the writing task was abolished in the municipal stage of the competition for the students of the 7th-8th forms for the last four years, 2020-2023. Whereas before the competition boasted a variety of tasks at all levels and for students of different age categories, there is an obvious trend towards standardisation in the latest Olympiad, where writing tasks only vary in accordance with the stage of the competition. Thus, there was an opinion essay based on a quotation for all students at the municipal stage; a proposal – with detailed prompts and guidelines – at the regional stage; and a short story at the final stage with a prompt and reminder of the conventions provided as scaffolding for the contestants.

There is a reverse trend with the addition of the writing tasks in the Lomonosov Olympiad, with the introduction of the writing task at the final stage for students of the 5th-7th forms starting in 2020 (till the recent one). Moreover, the writing section for all age groups consists of two tasks

with similar tasks for the 5th-7th and 8th-9th form students (i.e., an opinion essay and a story based on a visual prompt). The tasks for the 10th-11th forms are more challenging – a short story and an imaginary interview – requiring more profound thinking skills.

There are only negligible transformations in the writing tasks of the HSE Olympiad. Last year's tasks, like those before that, contained creative writing tasks either based on visual prompts (7th-8th forms); comparative article with two quotes as writing prompts (9th-10th forms); and only the task for the 11th form students saw the changes in the format of the input provided for students (previously, it was a saying; last year, a reading input.)

There is little data to judge about the transformation of the MSU Olympiad, as the most recent update goes back to 2020/2021. However, it is worth mentioning that the writing section consists of two tasks for both groups (5th-9th and 10th-11th forms), where the first task is standard for both groups: essay based on a prompt and referring to the reading task before the section. The second task shows a transition from simpler articles based on true stories to more complicated tasks involving data analysis (the analysis of a table with survey results).

Although the analysis of the tasks in the SPBU Olympiad did not reveal any changes in the task types, the array of tasks in the writing section is a point to highlight. There are five different writing tasks (same for all forms) in this competition; in other words, they constitute the major testing focus: an opinion essay, a part of a story, a comment on a saying, a response to visual prompts, and a process description.

However amazing and efficient those tasks may be at checking students' ability to think critically and write texts of different genres, they are probably the ones to be changed soon due to the development of AI, and its ability to write answers to the most challenging tasks in a matter of seconds. Universities in charge of Olympiads will have to rethink the tasks used to assess writing skills or introduce speaking tasks, where examiners will see candidates face-to-face, which is currently shunned.

3.2.2. Speaking

The need for human examiners to score productive skills and some listening tasks highlights a logistical challenge. With such large participant numbers (over 110,000 in the elimination round and 5,000 in the final), the process becomes extremely time-consuming.

The tasks checking the speaking skills of the secondary and high school students have only a negligible presence in the range of the Olympiad tasks with only one Olympiad utilising it and only in the elimination round (the All-Russian Olympiad). This task has no representation in the subsequent round in any of the Olympiads considered. Whereas the tasks designed to check contestants' writing skills have increased in number by the final round with 5 out of 5 Olympiads providing this type of task. On top of that, these tasks give more than 50% of the total round).

3.2.3. Culture Studies

Another trend that is clearly visible in Table 2 given above is that all the Olympiads analysed tend to check partakers' knowledge of the history and culture of English-speaking countries to a certain extent. There is a section on Culture Studies in 5 out of 5 Olympiads in the Final Round and 2 out of 5 in the Elimination Round. Yet, even though such Olympiads as MSU, SPBU, and

Lomonosov do not have tasks testing awareness of socio-cultural data explicitly in the Elimination Round, they use authentic literature texts, including poems, and texts about the history and culture of English-speaking countries while checking both receptive and productive skills.

There is also a tendency to use culture-specific tasks as the basis for creative writing. Since 2020/2021, the HSE Olympiad has employed the strategy of immersive context assessment; all the tasks in the final round are devoted to one topic. For school graduates, it was connected with historical events; for the 9th-10th grades – literature; and for grades 7-8 – arts. The knowledge of the period was checked indirectly yet thoroughly when students were expected to write a story or give a description of a piece of art with a historical perspective in mind.

3.3. Integrated skills and transition from receptive to productive skills

The Olympiads were also analysed for the presence of integrated skills tasks, i.e., combining two types of inputs or requiring competitors to analyse an extended excerpt of written or spoken discourse and requesting from the participants to produce a piece of work based on that. The tasks aimed at assessing the integrated skills of the participants were by far the least common until 2018. Only two Olympiads employed them then: the All-Russian Olympiad used this task in Listening & Reading and the SPBU Olympiad in the Reading & Writing section. Yet, starting with 2019, there were some sporadic occurrences of different combinations of such tasks (Listening & Reading & Writing section in Lomonosov (2018-2020)) and steady growth has been visible since 2020 in all 5 Olympiads (e.g. Listening & Writing in HSE). The rise in the use of integrated skills tasks might be explained by the fact that such tasks encourage school students to use and hone the soft skills required in everyday and academic life, thus implicitly preparing students for real-life challenges.

Through the introduction of integrated tasks, Olympiad organisers may promote tasks where writing activity stems from reading or listening. Active skills, such as reading and listening, should not be separated from other skills, inter alia, writing – note-taking, summarising, and mentioning factual information in correspondence. Contestants take notes of what they heard or read and then present the information collected in some other form (Byrne, 1993). According to Byrne (1993, p.70), text – either read or spoken – provides a "natural context" for writing. Even reading comprehension tasks at a lower level might involve basic elements of writing – short answer questions or information transfer – which might further develop into a more complex integrated task completion or independent writing task. The All-Russian Olympiad, for instance, required the contestants to complete cross-text multiple matching based on a reading and listening task (final round). Both the All-Russian and HSE Olympiads included listening comprehension tasks but with different requirements. The All-Russian final round required cross-text multiple matching, while the HSE Olympiad asked contestants to summarize lectures.

4. DISCUSSION

The trends outlined above might be partially explained with the following assumptions. The major changes in the task formats employed might be influenced by the pervasiveness of online learning and, as a result, by the choice and limitations of online platforms used. Another cause might be an ever-growing number of participants, as the process of checking the tasks could be simplified if the knowledge and skills of the students were checked by means of discrete-point testing. This also increases the practicability of the test for the administrative staff; otherwise, the validity and reliability of such tests dwindle.

The use of standard task types in listening and reading might be attributed to the relatively scarce number of experienced item-writers and the considerable workload they are to shoulder apart from their responsibility to develop test materials, as the vast majority of them tend to be University EFL teachers. Thus, past papers from international exams are used to develop tasks for the Olympiads.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the increase in the proficiency level of the tasks. Whereas initially the tasks were mainly aimed at the students having a B2 level of proficiency, now successful candidates are expected to have mastered their language skills up to C2 level (CEFR). This considerable intellectual challenge might also be due to the intent of the administrative staff to narrow down the list of participants by the final round and eliminate weaker competitors at an earlier stage. Another plausible reason is the rise in the general level of language proficiency of the candidates.

That assumption leads us to the issues at the preparation stage. Where might the teachers who prepare their students for the linguistic Olympiads go wrong? One of the problems might be connected to their inability to see the evolution of the task. The teachers look at the format of the task rather than evaluate the increase in complexity of the task in question over the years. Another issue might be attributed to the fact that some teachers familiarise their students with the format of a particular task rather than hone a skill that could help them deal with a greater variety of tasks that, in essence, check similar skills or abilities.

4.1. Recommendations

Taking all the above factors into account, the authors of the article recommend that teachers draw their students' attention to the tasks in their current coursebooks that are similar to those in different competitions. This will help to boost the level of involvement and the reasons behind the choice of particular tasks.

Teachers might opt for past examination papers of international language examinations for different proficiency levels. Suffice it to say that many material developers use the tasks for B2 First, C1 Advanced, and Russian Unified Exam in English (Kurasovskaya, 2021) as a basis for the Olympiad tasks. Thus, work on the format and the items tested in those past papers might help students develop strategies that they might need to apply in a range of language competitions.

Creative tasks are an area that requires special attention from teachers. Even when their students display the ability to handle the task, they might be limited in terms of lexical resources required for the successful completion of the task. Forcing students to cram for the competition by covering an endless list of words and expressions addressing a particular topic has proven to be traumatic and ineffective (Lai, 2022; Brinthaupt & Shin, 2001), as students are rarely able to apply those appropriately or recall an item required in situ. The acquisition presupposes a much deeper understanding of a lexical item encountered. It is the continual process of highlighting the connotation, register, and genre applied to words (inter alia) that ensures better comprehension and more confident usage of the item in the future (Sun & Zhao, 2015).

The lexical approach, which has become increasingly popular over the last several years in Russia (Kozhukhova, 2020; Reztsova & Savina, 2021; Igolkina & Yazynina, 2022; Panina & Fursova, 2022) could be a means to an end in an attempt to mitigate the issue of expanding an advanced range of vocabulary within a relatively short term. With the help of the input and guidance provided by teachers, students might grasp the importance of focusing on priming – the process in which a word might acquire specific associations through repeated encounters (Thornbury, 2006;

Hyung, 2019). This process might facilitate the development of both receptive and productive skills (Dellar, 2016) as well as their native-like usage (El-Dakhs, 2017). However, some teachers attach greater importance to learning less frequent, and thus useless, language rather than drawing students' attention to collocations (Dellar, 2016).

Teachers might find it instrumental to devote more attention to integrated tasks, where students should first process written or audio discourse and then transform it into their own spoken or written text. This would streamline the process of noticing. At a later stage of this process, students might need to work on creative tasks from the Olympiads, where they might use reading or listening tasks as a valuable input source of language (i.e., lexical items and grammatical structures).

Considering the topics generally included in the creative parts of the Olympiads, several topics from a popular series of coursebooks with a focus on lexical approach ("Outcomes" for Upper-Intermediate and Advanced levels (National Geographic Learning, n.d.)) or even the school EFL curriculum coursebook might come in handy. Despite having topics that are particularly interesting for adults, they correlate with the topics of creative tasks in the linguistic competitions. Those are supported by a range of writing tasks that help students develop their writing competence. Thus, a carefully chosen set of topics for preparation might promote the learning process and help to achieve the result desired in several Olympiads while covering the school curriculum content. Alternatively, those topics might be used as an intermittent addition to the main course if the teacher has some extra hours. This will present a change to the routine and certain unassessed challenges that students always welcome. Having considered the scope of topics in some Olympiads over the recent years, we could identify their repetitive nature; thus, the ability to apply lateral skills to various tasks will surely improve the performance of the students in language Olympiads.

4.2. Limitations

Despite the fact that most Olympiads bear a range of similarities that define the scope of common tasks for preparation, there is an obvious impasse preventing us from compiling a set of guidelines for teachers who aspire to prepare their students for this type of alternative assessment, namely, a continuous upgrade of the materials and adjustment in the format of the competition. This can be clearly traced in the analysis of the task types in different Olympiads over the years in question. The changes might be attributed to the fact that universities, being conduits for the development and implementation of wider societal impacts (Deiaco et al., 2012), have been trying to identify the tasks that match the requirements that they apply to applicants and undergraduates in their first year. As competition for tuition-free government-funded university places intensifies, the complexity and challenge of the Olympiad tasks increase accordingly.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Having started as an alternative assessment of language proficiency, language Olympiads in Russia turned into another high-proficiency multi-round exam in English, which directly correlates with the portrait of a prospective university fresher. So to speak, as major universities long to see students who have more than passable analytical and critical thinking skills and are able to cope with future academic challenges, they incorporate into their Olympiads cross-text multiple matching tasks based on reading and listening and introduce writing tasks that stem from reading and listening tasks. In a nutshell, the tasks aimed at assessing integrated skills, which used to be the least common, are now gaining ground.

Trying to reach out into the farthest corners of our vast country in search of future Lomonosovs, Universities make good use of technology and conduct Olympiads online. This takes its toll on the variety of tasks employed as item-writers tend to be limited by the constraints of digital platforms while students have an array of resources at their fingertips, together with the AI, which seems to be developing at an interstellar speed, which may turn any task at any language level into a piece of cake. AI tackles some of the most challenging tasks in a matter of seconds, and this is something that should be considered by both the item writers and the administrative staff of the universities. They might either rethink the use of their most trusted productive tasks or heavily invest in proctoring and e-proctoring systems, involving, among others, the use of two or more devices to record the exam (Mohammed & Ali, 2022; Abbas & Hameed, 2022), or go back old-school. Whatever they do, we will have to face it, yet the Olympiads will hardly stay the same.

Conflict of interests
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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