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## FEATURES OF PREPARATION FOR SPEAKING CONTEST AT ALL-RUSSIAN OLYMPIAD IN ENGLISH

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### **Abstract**

**Relevance.** The All-Russian Olympiad of schoolchildren in English belongs to intellectual competitions of increased complexity, requiring knowledge not only of the language, but also of the features of the constantly changing format of tasks, which determines the relevance of this study.

**Goal** is to identify the major features of the tasks of the Speaking contest of the Olympiad in English at the regional stage, as well as the principles of successful preparation, which will become the basis for creating the Olympiad courses in modern school.

**Procedure and methods.** The tasks of the previous Olympiads were analyzed, as well as the works of home and foreign scientists on this topic. The personal experience of participating in the jury of this contest was generalized, as well as the experience of preparing Moscow groups of the Olympiad participants.

**Scientific novelty and/or theoretical and/or practical significance.** The results of our research make a certain contribution to the theory and methodology of preparing for oral contests of intellectual competitions. Practical significance lies in publishing the manual on the topic which can be in demand for preparing future participants of the contests.

**Results.** Typical specifics of the tasks of the oral round were identified; main difficulties the participants face were analyzed; the recommendations were given; training tasks for working with the group of participants were published.

**Conclusions.** Preparation for the Olympiad rounds is systematic, in the course of classes it is necessary to pay attention to typical difficulties, and to work with students in the framework of building an individual trajectory.

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

## ОСОБЕННОСТИ ПОДГОТОВКИ К КОНКУРСУ «ГОВОРЕНИЕ» НА ВСЕРОССИЙСКОЙ ОЛИМПИАДЕ ШКОЛЬНИКОВ ПО АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

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### **Аннотация**

**Актуальность.** Всероссийская олимпиада школьников по английскому языку относится к интеллектуальным соревнованиям повышенной сложности, требующим знания не только языка, но и особенностей постоянно меняющегося формата заданий, что и обуславливает актуальность данного исследования.

**Цель** – выявление форматных особенностей заданий устного тура всероссийской олимпиады по английскому языку на региональном этапе, а также принципов успешной подготовки, которые станут основой создания олимпиадных курсов в современной школе.

**Методы исследования.** Нами были изучены материалы заданий прошлых лет, а также труды отечественных и зарубежных авторов по данной тематике. Был получен и обобщён собственный эмпирический опыт участия в жюри и при подготовке олимпиадных групп в городе Москве.

**Научная новизна / теоретическая и/или практическая значимость.** Результаты нашего исследования вносят определённый вклад в теорию и методику подготовки к устным конкурсам интеллектуальных состязаний. Практическая значимость заключается в публикации пособия по заявленной тематике, которое может применяться для подготовки будущих участников олимпиад.

**Результаты исследования.** Нами выявлены типичные особенности заданий устного тура, проанализированы основные трудности, с которыми сталкиваются участники, на основе вышеизложенного предложены рекомендации для подготовки, а также опубликованы тренировочные задания для работы с группой.

**Выводы.** Подготовка к олимпиадным турам носит системный характер, в рамках занятий необходимо как обращать внимание на типичные трудности, так и работать с учащимися в рамках построения индивидуальной траектории.

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

## INTRODUCTION

Oratory competitions are often organised by various higher educational institutions and held on-site, and, in general, aim to reveal how confidently applicants can speak English. Of course, a monologue prepared in advance does not and cannot reflect the full range of students' skills and competencies, which makes the element of dialogue that follows it a necessary and important part of such competitions. At the later stages of the All-Russian School Olympiad in English, there are 20 marks available (out of a total of, typically, 100) for the Speaking part, which raises the stakes and makes strong performance on this task a vital prerequisite for overall success. As a rule of thumb, the Speaking task is consolidated as a mandatory part of the Olympiad at the regional stage and is held on a separate day from the written test.

The core of the task is a monologue statement (e.g., a presentation or a guided tour) on a given topic, continued by an exchange between the speaker and an interlocutor (typically a fellow contestant or a member of the jury), with the latter asking follow-up questions on the topic. Candidates generally find speaking competitions relatively easy;

however, they do still require some preparation, both psychological and methodological (i.e. working with the task format). In the academic year 2020/21, speaking rounds were held online at both the regional and the final stages, which also meant certain modifications had to be made to the preparation strategy. It should be noted that communicative competence is emphasised as being the single most important competence in modern approaches to teaching foreign languages, since the skills of constructing logical statements, answering questions, and engaging in discussion form the foundation for meaningful communication in an English-speaking society.

## MAIN PART

### **The aim and objectives of the study.**

The purpose of our study is thus to examine the task format features specific to Speaking competitions, as well as to set out preparations guidelines. The subject of the study encompasses the Speaking tasks of the regional stage of the Olympiad, the organisational procedure of the competition proper and the assessment criteria.

**Methodology.** In our study, we rely on both domestic and foreign publications on

the topic of the article, as well as on our own empirical experience as a jury member and a Moscow Olympiad team coach (the latter in the capacity of an employee of the Centre of Pedagogical Excellence, the entity responsible for the organisation of the regional stage of the Olympiad in Moscow and the preparation of students for subject Olympiads in general). The theoretical relevance of this study is underscored by our analysis of the genesis of the content of Speaking tasks and our consideration and generalisation of scientific materials related to the topic, including official documents and recommendations of the Central Subject-Methodological Commission. We also provide an analysis of the assessment criteria and a list of ways in which they, in our opinion, need to be modified for clarity. The practically relevant outcomes are the list of preparation recommendations that we have detailed and the practice tasks we have devised for use in the classroom within the framework of Olympiad preparation addressing the specific aspects students typically struggle with.

We have studied a multitude of publications on the topic of our study by both Russian and foreign authors. A number of researchers highlight the importance of developing communication skills in the process of learning a foreign language – this also applies at the level of interactive interaction, when mediation skills become a priority, with students having to engage in dialogue, ask for clarification, and answer questions whilst staying mindful of, among other things, conventional norms of politeness [1; 10; 12]. We would like to separately point out the works of the authors of the Olympiad tasks, which describe the principles followed in devising speaking tasks, as well as the assessment criteria [2; 8; 11]. Some researchers discuss the principles of preparing for Olympiad tasks in a holistic, integrated manner [3; 4]. A number of authors single out the communicative approach as the cornerstone of the teaching and learning of foreign languages [7; 9; 13]. We also analysed past paper tasks, along with

the comments of the members of the Central Subject-Methodological Commission<sup>12</sup> [5].

Alongside this, we build on the empirical results obtained by us in the process of coaching Olympiad participants in Moscow during the period between 2017 and 2021 inclusive. We have identified and outlined the typical features of the Olympiad tasks, which allowed us to also compile a list of recommendations for teachers and students.

### **Organisation of research and progress.**

Tasks that allow candidates to demonstrate their productive language skills in action are often introduced into Olympiad competitions starting from the school stage. However, the local authority in charge of organising the school and municipal rounds may deliberately omit the Speaking task. The reasons for this choice generally stem either from technical unpreparedness, or from a shortage of examiners who are qualified to assess the candidates [6]. Recall that the protocol of the Olympiad includes a clause on participants appealing their results, including marks awarded for the Speaking part. Students are entitled to listen to a recording of their answer and receive an explanation wherever any mark deduction was made. With a large number of participants, the appeal process quickly becomes extremely time-consuming – as a result, regions such as Moscow choose not to hold a speaking contest at the municipal stage. However, starting from the regional stage, the speaking test becomes a compulsory component of this intellectual competition nationwide. A single set of tasks and assessment criteria is developed by the Central Subject-Methodological Commission to be used in all participating regions, which eliminates any ambiguity in interpreting the tasks.

<sup>1</sup> Kurasovskaya Yu. B., Borisova A. Yu., Simonyan T. A., Gorodetskaya L. A., Simkin V. N., Shvarts E. D. All-Russian Olympiad. English: Tasks for school, municipal, regional and final stages. With answers and comments: textbook. Moscow: Universitetskaya kniga Publ., 2016. 212 p.

<sup>2</sup> Guidelines for the school and municipal stages of the All-Russian Olympiad for schoolchildren in English in 2018/2019 / ed. Yu. B. Kurasovskaya. Moscow, 2018. 36 p.

Consider the task of the 2021 regional stage (tabl. 1). Students are offered 2 tasks, the first of these a monologue and the sec-

ond, a subsequent discussion with a partner. The preparation time is limited to 15 minutes.

Table 1/ Таблица 1

**Speaking task 2021 / Разговорное задание 2021**

<b>Task 1</b>	
<b>National Character in Russian Art</b>	
<b>1. Monologue: Time 3–4 minutes</b>	
Your English School Club is planning to organize a trip to a famous Russian Art Gallery. You should take your fellow students on an excursion and tell everything you know about the picture and the artist. Your task is to explain why the picture ( <b>Set 1: <i>The Merchant's Wife</i> by Boris Kustodiev</b> ) is so famous and why people should see it.	
Speak about:	
<b>The artist's life</b>	<b>The history of the painting</b>
<b>The theme of the painting</b>	<b>Cultural value of the painting</b>
You can make notes during the preparation time, but YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO READ them during the presentation.	
<b>2. Questions/ Answers: Time: 2- 3 minutes</b>	
Answer 2 QUESTIONS from your partner, who wants to get ADDITIONAL INFORMATION not mentioned in your presentation.	
<b>Task 2</b>	
<b>1. Listen</b> to the presentation of your partner ( <b>Set 2: <i>Bogatyr</i>s by Viktor Vasnetsov</b> ).	
<b>2. Questions/ Answers: Time: 2–3 minutes</b>	
Ask 2 QUESTIONS about the picture to get ADDITIONAL INFORMATION not mentioned in the presentation	

Source: Tasks of the All-Russian Olympiad for schoolchildren in English [Electronic resource].

Available at: <http://vos.olimpiada.ru> (accessed: 11.10.2021)

This is accompanied by a file containing essential information (in English) about the painting and the artist, as well as a printed copy of the painting (tabl. 2).

Table 2 / Таблица 2

**Information file / Информационный документ**

<b>The Merchant's Wife by Boris Kustodiev, Russia – USSR</b>	
<b>The Artist's Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russian and Soviet painter and stage designer</li> <li>• Born in Astrakhan (1878–1927)</li> <li>• 1896–1903 attended Ilya Repin's studio at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St.Petersburg</li> <li>• The artist penetrated the complex world of human soul creating portraits</li> <li>• Illustrated books: Nikolai Gogol's <i>Dead Souls</i>, <i>The Overcoat</i>; Leo Tolstoy's <i>How the Devil Stole the Peasant's Hunk of Bread</i> and <i>The Candle</i>.</li> <li>• Designed stage scenery at the Moscow Art Theatre.</li> <li>• 1916 tuberculosis of the spine made him paraplegic. Colourful paintings and joyful genre disguised his physical suffering, giving the impression of a carefree and cheerful life.</li> </ul>

Окончание табл. 2

<b>The History of the Painting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• His most famous picture <i>The Merchant's Wife</i> oil on canvas created in 1918 (exhibited in the State Russian Museum).</li> <li>• Art Nouveau style.</li> <li>• Continued to paint moving and colourful images even after illness had deprived him of the power to move independently.</li> <li>• According to the artist, he inhabited a magical kingdom of recollections, daydreams and nostalgic visions.</li> </ul>
<b>The Theme of the Painting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kustodiev's motifs and subjects symbolised a life that had disappeared irrevocably into the past, yet had still lost none of its tart aroma.</li> <li>• <i>The Merchant's Wife</i> is an excellent example of an artistic recollection of resplendent beauties, azure evenings, unhurried tea drinking ceremonies and a seemingly permanent way of life.</li> <li>• The sumptuous still-life on the table, the gleaming samovar, the bright watermelon, the marble shoulders of the heroine — the painterly beauty and expressiveness of every detail fill the canvas with light and colour.</li> <li>• The most striking image here is the merchant's wife drinking tea, her ample figure dominates the tea table and the surrounding area by her bulk and her self-satisfied expression. She is as round and as succulent as the fruit on the table.</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Value of the Painting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One of the most iconic paintings representing national Russian tea drinking culture.</li> <li>• The painting depicts the merchant class and adds a note of satire.</li> <li>• The artist used the bright reds and blues of Russian folk art.</li> <li>• Kustodiev delighted in painting merchants' plump wives during their leisure activities.</li> <li>• This work has an oriental richness of colour that Kustodiev saw as part of his Astrakhan heritage.</li> </ul>

Source: [Tasks of the All-Russian Olympiad for schoolchildren in English [Electronic resource]. Available at: <http://vos.olimpiada.ru> (accessed: 11.10.2021)].

After some analysis of the task, we can highlight the following features:

1. The monologue must fit within a certain time frame (in this case, from 3 to 4 minutes). If the participant fails to speak for the minimum amount of time required by the task, the jury may discard the answer and award it zero marks, or, conversely, stop the participant mid-speech if they exceed the upper limit.

2. The task implies the participants need to pretend to adopt a certain social role such as, in this case, that of a tour guide, and put across a clear message to convince the audience of something – here, the objective is to explain the genius of the painting and give the 'tourists' a reason to see it over other paintings.

3. In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, the participant's answer must necessarily cover all the points mentioned in the question, e. g. the artist's biography, the cultural value of the painting, etc.

4. Candidates must produce a spontaneous monologue and are not allowed to read from the text of their notes.

5. Follow-up questions should request additional information on the topic of the speech, and the enquirer must conform to the norms of politeness.

Some tasks are focussed around topics that bear a clear connection to Russian culture, which points to a certain 'patriotic' dimension incorporated into the objectives of the Olympiads. However, tracing back the history of Olympiad tasks reveals that this has not always been the case.

### Common mistakes

Based on our experience on the jury board and observations in the course of preparing students for the Olympiad, we have compiled the following list of mistakes commonly made by candidates:

1. Poor time management; for example, some students tend to spend an unnecessarily long time on the introduction, but completely forget to include a logical conclusion, or unintentionally skip some of the key points that need to be present in the main body.

2. Ignoring the implications of the social role assigned by the task; lack of logical connectors showing the speaker's involvement in the tour; neglect of the norms of politeness in the dialogue.

3. Factual errors in the presentation; this commonly occurs when students rely on their background knowledge rather than studying the information file.

4. Off-topic questions, or questions about the speaker's personal attitude towards, or

their feelings about the subject of speech; the task requires that the questions be strictly factual and related to the subject matter.

5. Failure to answer the interlocutor's questions; drawn-out pauses or interruptions due to a temporary loss of control under stressful conditions, which can also give rise to basic grammatical and lexical errors.

### Assessment criteria

Let us now turn to the official assessment criteria. 20 marks are available in total, of which achievement of the communicative objective in the monologue comprises 6 and in the dialogue, 5. More than half of the marks can thus be accessed simply by fine-tuning the content of the speech and not its language aspects. It is, in general, these criteria that students struggle to meet the most, although the jury members also take into account the logical consistency of the way in which the information is presented, the candidate's fluency and pronunciation, and the factual content of the presentation.

1. Monologue (6 marks maximum)
Aspect 1. The candidate speaks about the artist's biography.
Aspect 2. The candidate speaks about the history of the painting.
Aspect 3. The candidate speaks about the subject of the painting.
Aspect 4. The candidate discusses the cultural significance of the painting.
Aspect 5. The candidate gives reasons to support the argument that the tour participants should see this painting specifically.
Aspect 6. The candidate speaks fluently and spontaneously rather than reading from their notes
2. Dialogue (5 marks maximum)
Aspect 1. The candidate asks a first question on the topic of their partner's presentation requesting additional information that was not covered by the speaker in the presentation.
Aspect 2. The candidate asks a second question on the topic of their partner's presentation requesting additional information that was not covered by the speaker in the presentation.
Aspect 3. The candidate gives a logically sound and factually accurate answer to the interlocutor's first question.
Aspect 4. The candidate gives a logically sound and factually accurate answer to the interlocutor's second question.
Aspect 5. The candidate respects the conventional norms of politeness.

**Fig. 3 / Рис. 3.** Assessment criteria: achievement of the communicative objective / Критерии оценки: достижение коммуникативной цели

Source: [Tasks of the All-Russian Olympiad for schoolchildren in English [Electronic resource]. Available at: <http://vos.olimpiada.ru> (accessed: 11.10.2021)].



In our view, these criteria require some modification and clarification. For instance, it is not entirely clear why all the criteria are given equal weight, and how unconventional situations should be handled. Should jury members give a second chance to a candidate who gets flustered and asks to start over? How are the “conventional norms of politeness” and “factual accuracy of the answer” defined? Moreover, how and by whom is the factual accuracy of the presentation verified, and is the candidate allowed to make use of background knowledge in excess of the information presented in the information file accompanying the task? Aspect 5 of the monologue is one of the most challenging structural elements of the candidate’s speech, yet only has 1 mark available for it like all the other criteria. Aspect 6 also raises questions – it follows that if the candidate simply reads their speech from their notes from beginning to end, the maximum penalty they will face is a 1-mark deduction, which seems somewhat arbitrary. Further, it is unclear how candidates should approach answering follow-up questions that require a thorough knowledge of the topic beyond the information provided. Shaped by their competitive environment, today’s students deliberately ask difficult questions in an attempt to sabotage their competitor. The criteria also do not precisely define what constitutes appropriate treatment of answers that fall outside the required time range. For comparison, the

Writing task sets out an exact word count range and the maximum allowed deviations from it in either direction (10% from each boundary) that are not to be penalised, whilst in the Speaking part, jury members are left to use their own discretion. Another important adjustment we propose is ensuring the provision of a timer that candidates can see in the course of their answer.

The regional stage is a competition that is held at a single set time nationwide using the same tasks and assessment criteria. However, with criteria as vague as these, we often observe cases where completely different standards are applied to candidates by

different members of the same regional commission, let alone on a country-wide scale. A single universal standard of assessment is a cornerstone principle of the Olympiad, so it is important that the Central Subject-Methodological Commission address the ambiguities in the wording of these criteria. A more detailed analysis of the quality of the tasks, as well as approaches to assessment, looks to us fit to be the topic of a separate study.

**Study results and discussion.** Having considered the specific features of the Olympiad tasks and common mistakes both during the examination and in the classroom, we now offer the following recommendations for teachers and their students.

1. Fostering an intuitive sense of time is crucial; practicing giving both short (30–60) and longer (3–5 minutes) answers is instrumental in this. In this process, students begin to develop their own strategies for adapting their answer to the length requirement without sacrificing its content; they learn to trim down their monologue, leaving only the key points, or, conversely, to make it longer it with very general filler phrases.

2. Students need to gain experience in public speaking in English, as some of the most common issues are to blame on the speaker’s lack of confidence when working with a wide audience. Hiccups and unnecessary pauses are penalised with mark deduction, so students need to feel confident speaking the language, regardless of the subject matter. To do this, the teacher should employ frontal instruction techniques, as well as make use of modern interactive technologies. For example, students may be invited to record a video on a set subject, which is followed by reviewing the recording with the teacher and discussing any errors. Advanced students may find it useful to start their own blog and post videos on the Internet.

3. In case the candidate cannot immediately find an answer to a question asked by their partner, it can prove useful to have rough answer templates ready so that the candidate can begin their answer without an uncomfortable delay whilst still giving

themselves time to collect their thoughts. In extreme cases, it might be appropriate to provide a “half-answer”, i.e. apologise and explain that you are currently unable to give an exhaustive answer due to some external circumstances, but will provide one in the future. For example: *I would be glad to answer your question, but unfortunately, our time is over. This classroom is going to be occupied by another club community, so we have nothing to do but to follow their guidelines. Nevertheless, I will be glad to answer your question once we are in the corridor, outside the classroom.* Recall that the Speaking part implies complete immersion into a certain social role, and in real life it is often a very plausible possibility that the tour guide finds themselves unable to answer very niche questions. The jury may judge an answer such as this incomplete and deduce marks for it, but will not have an inherent reason to choose not to award marks for it at all, as would be the case if no answer were attempted.

4. We encourage students to not only practise speaking themselves, but also to assess others using the official criteria. In our experience, we have found it useful to divide the class into several sub-groups, which each

evaluate 2-3 pairs of participants. After this, verdicts of different jury groups are compared, with the teacher acting as a senior expert who resolves disputed cases and has the final say in allocating marks. Modelling the situation from this angle is generally beneficial for students, promoting their understanding of the assessment criteria and enhancing their attention to detail by listening out for other people's mistakes. Having gained this experience, students are more mindful of their own mistakes and make fewer of them, at least in similar Speaking tasks.

5. To complement face-to-face work in the classroom, organise practice sessions using conferencing software (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, Discord), as due to risks posed by the pandemic the format of the Speaking competition may be changed from in-person to online at short notice.

### Evolution of tasks over time

Let us now consider several past-paper tasks ranging over the period 2011–2021. It is fairly trivial to see that the tasks underwent significant transformations both in form and content (tabl. 4).

Table 4 / Таблица 4

#### Task characteristics / Характеристики задачи

Year	Task	Presentation length	Contents of fact file
2011	deliver a mini report, comparing the information from CHARTS 1 and 2 concerning the interests of schoolboys in the UK and Morocco. Explain why these differences of interests exist. Make your suppositions about what causes them.	1.5–2 minutes	charts only
2012	imagine you are a newscaster in a TV studio. Make 3 mini TV reports of the news, based on the headlines of 3 photographs for the TV news programme “A ROUND UP OF THIS WEEK TOP STORIES FROM THE ANIMAL KINGDOM”	1.5–2 minutes	photographs and headlines in English only
2013	imagine you are a “tourist guide”. Your task is to tell a “foreign tourist” (your partner) about the famous Russian monument The Bronze Horseman .	2–3 minutes	text in Russian
2014	you are “a photographer” and you have taken 3 photos. Your task is to tell 3 stories about them in an entertaining way to convince “the editor of Nature magazine” (your partner) to publish them in the magazine.	2–3 minutes	photographs only



Окончание табл. 4

Year	Task	Presentation length	Contents of fact file
2015	imagine you are a tourist guide giving an excursion to a tourist – your partner, speaking about the famous Millennium Bridge in London, UK	2–3 minutes	text in Russian
2016	imagine you are a tourist guide giving an excursion to a tourist – your partner, speaking about the famous Moscow Underground, RF.	2 minutes	text in Russian
2017	imagine you are at the meeting of your English School Club. The meeting is devoted to Modern Wonders of the World. Your task is to make a presentation about the Suez Canal and prove that it can be considered a wonder of the modern world.	2–3 minutes	text in English
2018	imagine you are at the meeting of your English School Club. The Club members need to choose a place where they would like to work as volunteers in summer. The participants make reports on famous Russian national parks (nature reserves). Your task is to make a presentation about the Barguzinsky Nature Reserve to persuade your club members to work there in summer.	2–3 minutes	text in English
2019	your School Science Club is joining the International Scientific Society competition for the best documentary about an outstanding scientist. Imagine that you are at the meeting of your School Club. The Club members need to choose one scientist whose discoveries / inventions have changed the world for their documentary. Make a speech about Tim Berners-Lee to persuade your club members to choose his life story for the documentary.	2–3 minutes	text in English
2020	your School Travel Club is planning to organize a trip to Rotterdam. At the meeting of your club you have to take your classmates/ club members on a virtual tour of one the most fascinating modern constructions of the world: The Market Hall, Rotterdam to make them interested to go there. Your task is to explain why it could be the best choice for your school to visit it.	2–3 minutes	text in English
2021	your English School Club is planning to organize a trip to a famous Russian Art Gallery. You should take your fellow students on an excursion and tell everything you know about the picture and the artist. Your task is to explain why the picture is so famous and why people should see it.	3–4 minutes	text in English

Source: [3].

Within the scope of our study, it was particularly important for us to observe the changes in the form and content of Speaking tasks over time and get some idea of what a prototypical task might look like presently. As we have seen, in recent years, the required speaking time ranges from 2 to 4 minutes, the

background information is provided in English, and the social role that the participants of the Olympiad are prompted to assume has something to do, in one way or another, with a school Speaking club. The main objective set out in every task is to convince the audience of, explain, and/or demonstrate some key point.

Having drawn these conclusions, it therefore appears not particularly practical or productive to use outdated tasks and formats in Olympiad preparation, even though familiarity with them may be instructive.

It should also be noted that relying exclusively on past Olympiad tasks in the preparation process is unlikely to be effective for a number of reasons:

1. The number of past-paper tasks available is understandably limited. Adequate and comprehensive practice in the classroom requires the use of additional Speaking topics, whilst some of the actual past Olympiad tasks can be reserved for mock tests and progress assessment purposes.

2. Both the content and the form of the tasks have seen marked changes over the years, which reduces the practicality of using

tasks from all but several of the most recent Olympiads.

3. Olympiad Speaking tasks are identical for candidates across the three year groups (year 9 to year 11), so a fairly common situation in the preparation process is where many students are already familiar with a past-paper task from their own experience; any intended novelty is lost as a result.

The main *practical outcome of our study* has been the publication of our textbook *Great Lengths*, in which we offer 15 practice tests, each comprising two Speaking tasks.<sup>1</sup>

These tasks were devised building on real examples from past Olympiads, for instance (tabl. 5):

<sup>1</sup> Gulov A. *Great Lengths*. The All-Russian School Olympiad: Preparation for Municipal, Regional and Final Stages. Britain, Pearson Education Publ., 2021. 206 p.

Table 5 / Таблица 5

#### Specimen task / Образец задачи

Preparation (15 minutes)

Presentation and questions (10 minutes)

##### Task 1

1. Monologue (2–3 minutes)

Your school is planning to organise a trip to London. At the meeting of your club you have to take your classmates on a virtual tour of one the most fascinating buildings in the world, **Westminster Abbey**. Your task is to explain why it could be the best choice for your school to visit it in summer. Speak about:

Location	History
Ceremonies	Architecture

You can make notes during the preparation time, but you are not allowed to read them during the presentation.

2. Questions/Answers (2–3 minutes)

Answer 2 questions from your partner, who wants to get additional information not mentioned in your presentation about the topic from the fact file.

##### Task 2

1. Listen to the presentation of your partner.

2. Questions/Answers (2–3 minutes) Ask 2 questions about the topic to get additional information not mentioned in the presentation.

The use of our textbook enables teachers to improve the efficiency of their preparation strategies for the Speaking task by, amongst other things, incorporating a variety of formats into the practice sessions. The textbook is widely available free of charge.

The textbook was piloted during our work with the Moscow team between 2017–2021, and we have indeed observed strong performance from candidates from Moscow, which lends validity to the recommendations we have outlined (tabl. 6).

Table 6 /Таблица 6

**The performance of the Moscow team at the final stage, 2017–2021 / Результаты участия Московской команды в финалеб 2017–2021**

	2017	2018	2019	2021
Moscow team, total members	72	79	92	113
Winners and prize-winners (Moscow only)	47	54	45	66
Winners and prize-winners (total)	82	89	92	116
Share of winners and prize-winners from Moscow	57%	60%	48%	57%

**CONCLUSION**

Modern foreign language education is experiencing a certain boom, which is implicitly reflected in the increase in the difficulty level of the Olympiad tasks. As soon as the jury of the final stage observe a mass “over-performance” that makes it difficult to differentiate between candidates, this is ad-

ressed by tailoring the format or increasing the difficulty level of the tasks. However, the tasks offered at the regional stage have been very consistent as far as the level of language proficiency they require (approximately B2–C1), which characteristic is imposed by the general aim at this stage of selecting the most competitive candidates from each individual region to participate in the final stage (200–250 people nationwide).

Speaking tasks typically do not present any major issues for candidates with some Olympiad experience who are familiar with the format and able to effectively manage their stress. The features of tasks we have highlighted and the recommendations that we have outlined building on those, will enable students to develop their own success strategies and efficiently prepare for this type of intellectual competition whilst avoiding common mistakes.

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**ПРАВИЛЬНАЯ ССЫЛКА НА СТАТЬЮ**

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