*Research article*

# ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF FUNCTIONAL LITERACY OF GRADUATES OF ETHIOPIAN SCHOOLS: THE CASE OF THE SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA PEOPLES' REGION

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**Abstract.** The article considers the problem of the quality of general education in Ethiopia in terms of the development of functional literacy in school students, using as the example the case of the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' Region. The idea of this research, conducted within the framework of international cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is to organize a mutually beneficial partnership in the field of education between the two countries and promote the improvement of the quality of education in Ethiopia.

The authors describe the results of a study of the functional literacy of graduates of Ethiopian schools using the case of the city of Bonga as an example. In the context of developing international cooperation between the Ulyanovsk State Pedagogical University and Ethiopian universities, a task arises of the development of a diagnostic toolkit accessible to both parties and constructed on the basis of educational content, which would include information about Russia and Ethiopia. The use of such a toolkit allowed the authors to assess the development of three types of functional literacy in students: in reading, mathematics, and natural sciences. Combining the indicators for each type makes it possible to obtain a general picture of the functional literacy of school graduates in the city of Bonga, namely: the majority of participants (85.2%) have an insufficient level of functional literacy, 12.4% have it at a low level, and 2.4% of respondents have an average level of functional literacy development. The authors outline the prospects for further research into the functional literacy of students in Ethiopia, such as improving the diagnostic tools; upgrading the educational content by increasing its thematic diversity and translating into the official languages of the country; expanding the geographical scope of the research; improving the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the sample.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, quality of education, Russian-Ethiopian cooperation, functional literacy, types of functional literacy, development of functional literacy, methods of assessing functional literacy

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**Authors' contributions:** joint research.

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of cooperation between Russia and Ethiopia is of great importance for the educational systems of both countries. In modern conditions, international partnership in the field of education is one of the ways to implement the so-called soft power, which can be defined as "support and popularization of the Russian language and culture of the peoples of the Russian Federation in foreign countries, export of Russian educational services ..., development of youth exchanges, etc." [Arskaya 2017: 141].

In this context, educational cooperation can be seen not only as a way to integrate Russian and Ethiopian resources for the more efficient development of the educational systems of the two countries but also as a tool to promote constructive international cooperation in the preservation of historical and cultural heritage. In accordance with the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Russia intends to contribute to the further establishment of Africa as a distinctive and influential center of world development, giving priority, among other areas, to promoting and developing links in the humanitarian sphere, including scientific cooperation, training of national personnel, promoting intercultural dialogue, protecting traditional spiritual and moral values.[1]

One of the areas of this cooperation is being implemented by Ulyanovsk State Pedagogical University named after I.N. Ulyanov (UlSPU) in cooperation with research and academic institutions in Ethiopia, in particular, with Bonga University and Jimma University, on the basis of bilateral agreements.

[1] The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.* 31.03.2023. https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/?lang=en (accessed: 21.02.2025)

In 2024, as part of the state assignment of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, UlSPU implemented the project "A model for the development of functional literacy of African students in the digital educational environment of schools (Ethiopia)" in cooperation with Bonga University. One of the objectives of the project was to conduct research on the functional literacy of Ethiopian schoolchildren and to develop and apply the necessary diagnostic tools [Danilov et al., 2024].

Due to the lack of ready-made didactic and diagnostic tools designed for achieving the required educational and research goals (development and assessment of functional literacy) while at the same time contributing to the cultural integration of the two countries, scholars at Ulyanovsk University have developed some original educational content that includes relevant texts about Russia and Ethiopia, which became the basis for the creation of the author's methodology for assessing the formation of functional literacy. In 2024, this technique was successfully tested among high school students of Russian schools in Ulyanovsk [Danilov et al. 2025], which became a prerequisite for its application in the study of graduates of Ethiopian schools in the town of Bonga (South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region).

This determined the purpose of this work, which is to do research into the level of functional literacy among graduates of Ethiopian schools with the case study of the South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region.

## PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION QUALITY IN ETHIOPIA

A general characteristic of the vector of the development in the field of education in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in modern conditions is the desire to create a national education system. There are several promising areas that seem to be the most relevant in the focus of our research.

First of all, the training of teaching staff remains an unresolved problem [Tamrat, Levy 2017; Ayenalem et al. 2022; Habshush 2024]. Despite the opening of teacher training colleges in the early 1950s and subsequently teacher training programs at universities, the country has not been able to fully address the shortage of teaching staff. A number of scholars have noted that in the 21st century, there still remains an imbalance between the number of professionally trained teachers and the demand for such specialists in Ethiopian schools [Olkaba et al. 2019]. To date, the situation with the training of teaching staff has not changed fundamentally: only 12 universities in the country offer undergraduate programs in Education and Teaching.[2]

The Government of Ethiopia is currently striving to enable teachers to develop and maintain the necessary professional qualities. To achieve these goals, various initiatives have been developed and practical measures have been taken to encourage teachers, such as helping them adjust their careers, increasing their salaries, and many others. These steps were taken in order to motivate talented individuals to pursue careers in education, increase teachers' responsibility for the quality of the educational process, enhance the prestige of the teaching profession, and cultivate respect for the teacher both in school and in society.

[2] Ethiopia – Bachelor programs in Education and Teaching. *Free Apply*. 2025. https://free-apply.com/en/articles/country/337996/degree/1/program/19 (accessed: 10.04.2025)

At the same time, studies have shown that many teachers are not satisfied with the profession due to low wages and social status, as well as a heavy workload [Abie 2019; Habte 2019]. A significant number of secondary school teachers in Ethiopia started teaching without any substantial interest in the profession, due to forced employment or lack of other employment opportunities; many lost motivation soon after starting work. Teachers who have started work claim that they chose a profession due to the lack of alternatives, and 70% of them would have gone to work in another field if they had received an equivalent salary in other professions [Mekonnen 2017].

The problems of prestige of the teaching profession and of training and support of teaching staff are important factors affecting the quality of education in the country. Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all[3], as one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, defines the vectors of major changes taking place in the global educational space. Along with the digitalization of education [Yeheis 2022; Ulanova 2022; Fituni 2022; Khrenkov 2023; Prikhodko, Sherov–Ignatiev 2024] and the development of competencies in demand in the 21st century [Kinfu 2010; Grudko 2019; Krylova 2019], the development of functional literacy of students is considered an important area of ensuring the quality of education [Zakharova 2023].

## COOPERATION OF ULYANOVSK UNIVERSITY WITH UNIVERSITIES OF ETHIOPIA IN THE TRAINING OF TEACHING STAFF

As a part of cooperation with the Russian Federation, research and educational projects are being implemented in Ethiopia aimed at improving the quality of education. These projects include cooperation with Russian universities.

One of the universities that is actively working in this area is the Ulyanovsk State Pedagogical University named after I.N. Ulyanov. Having initiated the establishment of three Centers for Open Education and Russian Language Teaching in Ethiopia, this university conducts multi-vector cooperation with Ethiopian partners. In order to help Ethiopian schoolteachers to obtain the competencies for the development and assessment of functional literacy of students, in 2024, scholars from the Russian university designed and tested, on the basis of such a Center at Bonga University, a professional development program, “Organization of project activities as a means of developing functional literacy of students in the digital educational environment of a school,” aimed specifically at this target category. Another step in this direction was the preparation of a methodology for assessing the level of functional literacy in Ethiopian schoolchildren, as well as its use for scientific research.

## THE METHODOLOGY of FUNCTIONAL LITERACY ASSESSMENT

The basis of the authors’ methodology aimed at assessing the levels of the main types of functional literacy (reading, mathematical, and natural science) [Danilov et al. 2024;

[3] Sustainable Development Goals. *UN*. 2015. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/en/education/ (accessed: 16.04.2025)

Danilov, Lukyanova, Shustova 2024] was the educational content developed after the analysis and selection of relevant texts about Russia and Ethiopia. The semantic context of the assignments is targeting the high school students in Ethiopia. However, this does not exclude the possibility of their use for the development and assessment of functional literacy of schoolchildren in Russia and other countries.

When developing the methodology, we proceeded from the following assumptions. Firstly, the content should be adapted to the social and cultural experience of Ethiopian schoolchildren while also helping to bring the cultures of Russia and Ethiopia closer together. Secondly, the use of this content in educational practice should contribute to solving the problem of developing the functional literacy of students. Thirdly, in order to determine the actual levels of the functional literacy, assignments should be designed by analogy with the PISA [4] model, since this study is aimed specifically at assessing functional literacy.

The structure of the assignments within this methodology is based on two factors. The first one defines the content of the assignments according to the five themes: 1) "Journey through Russia," 2) "Trip to Ethiopia," 3) "Culture of Ethiopia and Russia," 4) "Education and career choice," 5) "Agricultural industry and trade relations of Ethiopia." In our opinion, these topics should be relatable to the potential study participants (Ethiopian and Russian schoolchildren and teachers) [Danilov, Shustova, 2024].

When processing and interpreting the results of the functional literacy assessment, the following criteria should be applied: the assignments with a short or detailed answer are evaluated at 2, 1, or 0 points (a fully correct answer is 2 points, a partially correct answer is 1 point, and an incorrect answer is 0 points). Based on the results of the test, the level of functional literacy is determined according to the total score received by the student for completing all the assignments of each separate topic: "high" (from 16 to 18 points), "higher than average" (from 12 to 15 points), "average" (from 8 to 11 points), "low" (from 4 to 7 points), and "insufficient" (from 0 to 3 points). Thus, the maximum score for each of the topics is 18 points.

If necessary, a "paradigmatic" evaluation of the results and their interpretation can be carried out. In this case, researchers determine the necessary type of functional literacy (reading, mathematical, or natural science), after which a selection of the results obtained on all topics is made.

Since the number of assignments on all topics and for all types of literacy is the same—9 (45 tasks in total) and 3 (15 tasks in total), respectively—and the points for completing all tasks range from 0 (incorrect answer or no answer) and 1 (partially correct answer) up to 2 (completely correct answer), the levels of any type of functional literacy can be defined as "high" (6 points), "higher than average" (5 points), "average" (from 3 to 4 points), "low" (2 points), and "insufficient" (from 0 to 1 point).

A comprehensive assessment of the results of the study of the level of the functional literacy of schoolchildren using this methodology is based on the generalization of data obtained after the respondents have completed all the assignments for all topics.

[4] The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international Student Assessment Program, a test that evaluates the functional literacy of schoolchildren in different countries of the world.

It should be noted that the maximum number of points that a respondent can score is 18 points for a particular topic, 30 points for a particular type of functional literacy, and 90 points for the test as a whole.

For a comprehensive assessment, the results of the test should be pre-processed according to topics or the types of functional literacy. After that, the scores obtained should be summarized and compared with the following values:

| | |
|---|---|
| 73–90 points | High level of functional literacy |
| 55–72 points | Higher than average level of functional literacy |
| 37–54 points | Average level of functional literacy |
| 19–36 points | Low level of functional literacy |
| 0–18 points | Insufficient level of functional literacy |

## RESULTS OF THE FUNCTIONAL LITERACY ASSESSMENT

The assessment of functional literacy based on the abovementioned methodology was conducted on a sample of school graduates from the town of Bonga (South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region) at the Center for Open Education and Russian Language Teaching established at the University of Bonga. The study was conducted in September 2024. The total sample size was 50 people aged 18–19 years.

The assessment procedure included completing 45 assignments after reading the five texts mentioned above. All texts were translated into English, which the respondents were fluent in. In addition, a professor from UlGPU, who acted as the translator from Russian into English, and a lecturer from Bonga University, who helped, if necessary, in translating from English into the Kaffa language, participated in the process.

The assessment of reading literacy involved identifying the level of the following components: the ability to find and extract information, integrate and interpret it, and use information from the text to achieve personal goals. The assessment of mathematical literacy included determining the level of the ability to apply mathematical concepts, facts, and procedures in practice; interpret, use, and evaluate mathematical results; and translate a mathematical solution into the terms of an analysis of a problem situation. Scientific literacy assessment tasks are aimed at identifying the ability to understand the features of scientific research and scientific explanation of phenomena, interpret data, and use it to draw conclusions.

Based on the results obtained, the levels of functional literacy of Ethiopian students were determined. The generalized results of the study on each type of functional literacy (reading, mathematical, and natural science) for all five texts are presented in *Table* 1.

According to the score translation scale, almost all subjects demonstrate very "modest" results in terms of the level of functional literacy (from 0 to 16 points), identified in the process of completing tasks for each of the five texts.

As for *reading* literacy, 92.8% of students demonstrated an insufficient level, 1.2% of respondents had a low level, and only 6% of participants showed an average level of development of this component of functional literacy. There were no higher-than-average or high levels of reading literacy (*Fig.* 1).

Table 1. **The distribution of respondents who scored a certain number of points based on the results of performing tasks on various types of functional literacy**

| Score | Types of Functional Literacy | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Reading (persons) | Mathematical (persons) | Natural Science (persons) |
| 0 points | 3 | 6 | 8 |
| 1 point | 13 | 10 | 16 |
| 2 point | 8 | 10 | 5 |
| 3 point | 3 | 10 | 5 |
| 4 point | 3 | 6 | 3 |
| 5 point | 5 | 0 | 8 |
| 6 point | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| 7 point | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8 point | 2 | 5 | 3 |
| 9 point | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 10 point | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 11 point | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Number of respondents | 50 | 50 | 50 |

Source: compiled by the authors.

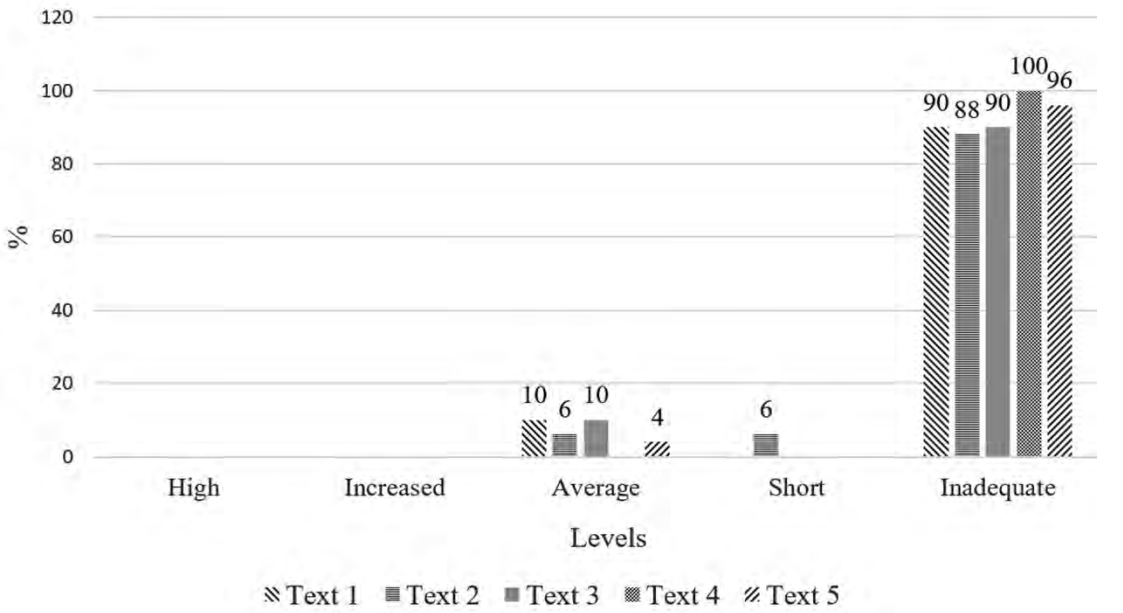


Fig. 1. **Level of functional literacy (%).**

Source: compiled by the authors.

The results of the participants were slightly higher in the assignments for assessing *mathematical* literacy. Thus, an insufficient level was shown by 77.6% of respondents, while low and average—by 16% and 6.4% of respondents, respectively. Higher-than-average and high levels of mathematical literacy were not identified (*Fig.* 2).

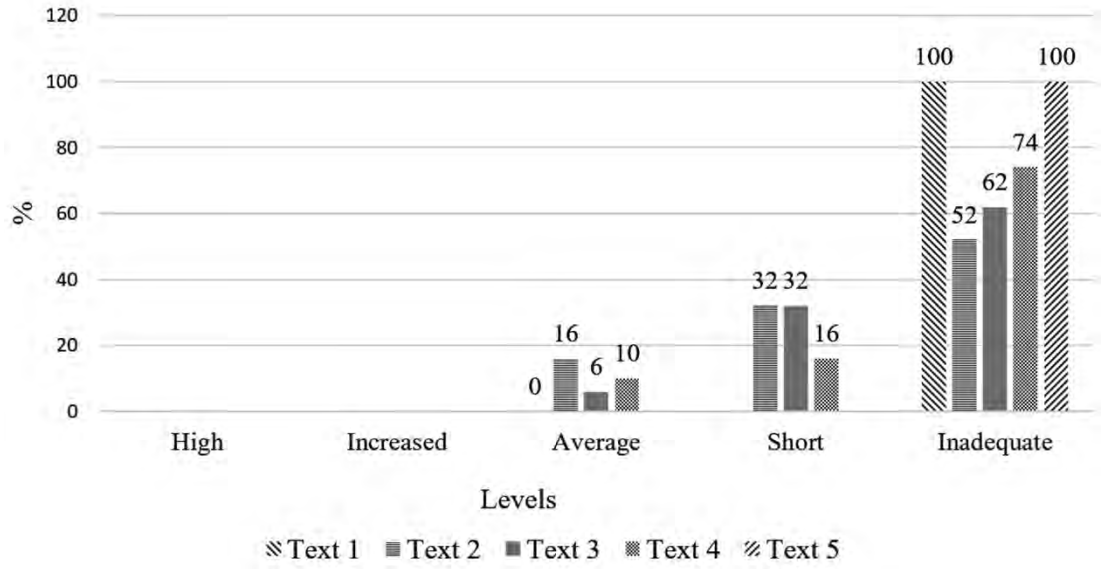


Fig. 2. **Level of mathematical literacy (%).**
Source: compiled by the authors.

The following results were obtained regarding the scientific literacy of the Ethiopian students: 82% of the subjects demonstrated an insufficient level, 13.6% demonstrated a low level, and 4.4% demonstrated an average level. There were no higher-than-average or high levels of this component of functional literacy (*Fig.* 3).

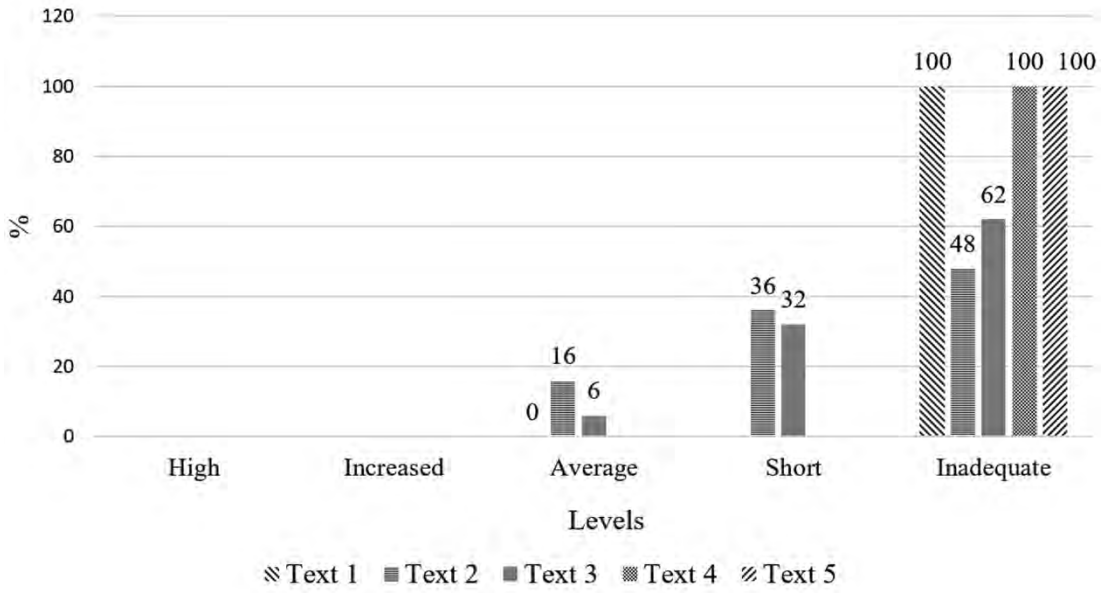


Fig. 3. **Scientific functional literacy of the Ethiopian students (%).**
Source: compiled by the authors.

Diagnostic data on the overall functional literacy (according to the five texts offered to the participants) showed that only 2.4% of the students showed an average level of functional literacy (for only two texts), another 12.4% demonstrated a low level (for 4 texts), and the remaining 85.2% of respondents had an insufficient level of functional literacy in all five texts (*Fig.* 4).

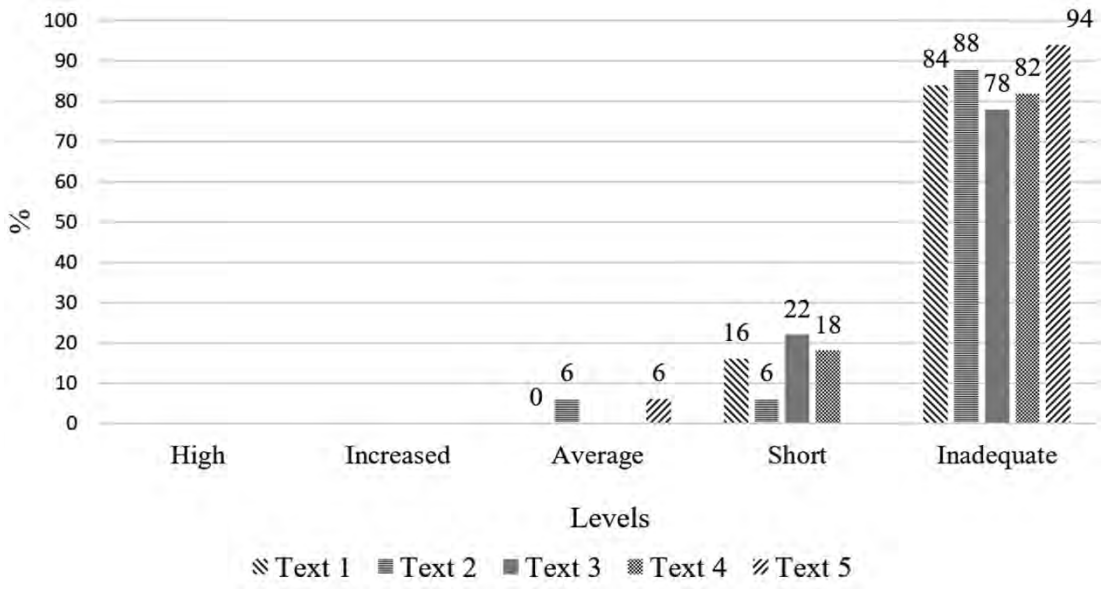


Fig. 4. **Level of functional literacy (%).**

Source: compiled by the authors.

Summing up the results of the assessment of functional literacy of students in the town of Bonga (South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region), it should be noted that its individual participants demonstrated a low or even an average level of the three (of the five identified by us) types of functional literacy when reading various texts. The overwhelming majority of the subjects (85.2%) demonstrated an insufficient level of functional literacy, 12.4% of the study participants have a low level, and another 2.4% of students have reached an average level.

One of the reasons explaining the results obtained is the lack of attention to the development of functional literacy among students, as evidenced by the fact that Ethiopia has never participated in PISA international functional literacy studies during their entire period. Another factor is the qualitative composition of the sample of respondents, which included only graduates of schools in a particular provincial town of Bonga. Conducting a study on stimulus material in the English language, non-native for the respondents, could act as an additional barrier preventing more relevant results from being obtained.

As a research perspective, we consider further improvement of the methodology for assessing functional literacy and the educational content based on it. In particular, this may be related to the development of new topics and tasks aimed at developing and evaluating all types of functional literacy, including financial, global competencies, and creative thinking. In addition, in accordance with the results obtained, adjustments can be made to the existing blocks of the methodology.

In order to obtain better results, it seems advisable to further translate the text of the methodology into one or more official languages of the country that are native to the study participants. This step will help expand the geography of the study by conducting it in other regions of Ethiopia, which will ensure heterogeneity of the sample and increase its volume.

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*Научная статья*

# ФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ ГРАМОТНОСТЬ ВЫПУСКНИКОВ ЭФИОПСКИХ ШКОЛ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ РЕГИОНА НАРОДОВ ЮГО-ЗАПАДА ЭФИОПИИ)

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**Аннотация.** В данной статье рассматривается проблема качества общего образования Эфиопии в аспекте формирования функциональной грамотности школьников на примере региона Народов юго-запада Эфиопии. Идея настоящего научного исследования, проведенного в рамках международного сотрудничества Российской Федерации и Федеративной Демократической Республики Эфиопия, заключается в организации взаимовыгодного партнерства в сфере образования двух стран и содействии повышению качества образования африканского государства. Авторами описываются результаты исследования функциональной грамотности выпускников эфиопских школ на примере города Бонга. В условиях активно развивающегося международного сотрудничества между Ульяновским государственным педагогическим университетом имени И.Н. Ульянова и эфиопскими вузами возникает задача, связанная с разработкой доступного для обеих сторон диагностического инструментария, сконструированного на основе образовательного контента, включающего информацию о России и Эфиопии. Использование данного инструментария позволило авторам осуществить оценку сформированности трех видов функциональной грамотности обучающихся: читательской, математической, естественнонаучной. Объединение показателей по каждому виду дает

возможность получить обобщенную картину функциональной грамотности выпускников школ города Бонга, а именно: у большинства участников (85,2%) она находится на недостаточном уровне развития, у 12,4% – на низком, и у 2,4% респондентов зарегистрирован средний уровень развития функциональной грамотности. Авторами обозначены перспективы дальнейшего исследования функциональной грамотности у обучающихся Эфиопии, среди которых совершенствование диагностического инструментария и образовательного контента, включая увеличение его тематического разнообразия, перевод на официальные языки страны, а также расширение географии, увеличение качественно-количественных характеристик выборки.

**Ключевые слова:** Эфиопия, качество образования, российско-эфиопское сотрудничество, функциональная грамотность, виды функциональной грамотности, развитие функциональной грамотности обучающихся, методика оценивания функциональной грамотности

**Конфликт интересов:** авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**Персональный вклад авторов:** совместное исследование.

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