Enhancing Learners' Functional Literacy through the Development of Life Competencies in Native Language Teaching

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The article substantiates the theoretical foundations and the didactic conditions for enhancing learners' functional literacy through the purposeful development of life competencies in the process of native language teaching. It is argued that the native language lesson is not merely a medium for the transmission of linguistic knowledge but the principal arena in which learners acquire the ability to apply language resources to real-life cognitive, communicative and social tasks. Drawing on the OECD PISA conceptualisation of reading literacy, the frameworks of twenty-first-century life competencies and socio-cultural and functional-semantic theories of language development, the study analyses the relation between life competencies and functional literacy and identifies the mechanism of their mutual development. On this basis a structural-functional model of native language teaching oriented towards functional literacy is proposed, comprising target, content, procedural and evaluative components, together with a set of pedagogical conditions for its implementation: contextual and situational tasks, authentic and functional texts, project and case methods, integrative language activities and criterion-referenced assessment. The article concludes that the systematic development of communicative, cooperative, critical-thinking, creative, digital and self-management competencies within native language lessons constitutes an effective pathway for raising learners' functional literacy and their readiness for lifelong learning.

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1 Introduction

The global transformation of education is characterised by the transition from a knowledge-reproductive paradigm to a competency-based one, in which the principal outcome of education is measured not by the volume of memorised information but by learners' capacity to apply knowledge in unfamiliar, real-life situations. International comparative studies such as PISA operationalise this outcome through the construct of functional literacy, understood as the ability of students to use their reading, writing and calculation skills for their own and the community’s development in order to solve life’s problems in accordance with the demands of a given age [10]. In the PISA framework, reading literacy is defined as the ability to understand, use, evaluate,

reflect on and engage with written texts in order to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential and participate in society [7].

For the national education systems of the Commonwealth of Independent States, including Uzbekistan, the problem of functional literacy has acquired particular urgency in connection with participation in international assessment programmes and the ongoing modernisation of national curricula. The Presidential Decree No. PF-6097 on measures for the development of education and science in the period of the New Uzbekistan and the Uzbekistan-2030 Development Strategy explicitly prioritise raising the quality of general education to international standards, broadening the use of modern pedagogical technologies and forming learners' independent thinking and practical skills [8, 9]. Consequently, every school subject, and first of all the native language, which constitutes both an object and an instrument of learning, is expected to contribute to the formation of functionally literate personalities.

At the same time, pedagogical practice reveals a persistent contradiction. Traditional native language teaching remains predominantly grammar-centric: it emphasises the reproduction of rules, paradigms and definitions, while functional application, that is, comprehending authentic texts, constructing written and oral utterances for specific communicative purposes, evaluating information and defending one's position, is displaced to the periphery of the lesson. As a result, learners may demonstrate formal knowledge of linguistic material yet fail to mobilise it in life-like situations, which international and national assessments consistently register as insufficient functional literacy. The purpose of this article is to substantiate the theoretical foundations, the model and the didactic conditions for enhancing learners' functional literacy through the purposeful development of life competencies in native language teaching.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Theoretical framework

The concept of functional literacy emerged in the second half of the twentieth century within UNESCO's literacy programmes and originally denoted the minimum of reading, writing and numeracy skills necessary for an individual's functioning in professional and everyday contexts [10]. Subsequently the concept was considerably enlarged: functional literacy came to denote the personality's ability to use all the knowledge, skills and strategies acquired in education to solve the

widest possible range of life tasks, whether communicative, cognitive, informational, social or civic. In PISA this construct is decomposed into reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, with reading literacy serving as the most universal component, since any intellectual activity in education is mediated by text [6].

The competence-based movement has produced a family of frameworks describing the competencies required for life in the twenty-first century. The Delors report to UNESCO formulated the four pillars of education, namely learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be, which anticipated the competency turn [2]. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning systematised eight key competences, including communication in the mother tongue, learning to learn, social and civic competences and digital competence. Comparative analyses of such frameworks show a stable consensus core: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, digital literacy and self-regulation [13]. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 consolidates this core into the vision of the competent learner who mobilises knowledge, skills, attitudes and values reflexively in order to act in complex situations [6].

In the pedagogical theory of the post-Soviet space the competence approach was elaborated, among others, by Zimnyaya, who interpreted competencies as resultative-target foundations of education comprising cognitive, motivational, value and behavioural components [14], and by Khutorskoy, who distinguished key competencies as meta-educational outcomes crossing subject boundaries [5]. Both interpretations are directly relevant to the present study, since they treat competencies as integrative formations that cannot be developed by reproductive means. The theoretical link between language education and functional literacy is supplied by socio-cultural and functional-semantic theories. Vygotsky demonstrated that higher mental functions originate in social interaction mediated by language, so that the development of speech and the development of thinking, consciousness and personality are internally unified processes [12]. Halliday conceptualised language as a social semiotic whose organisation is determined by the functions it serves, which implies that language teaching must be teaching of what one can do with language [3]. Hymes established the criterion of appropriateness of language use in social contexts, which directly anticipates the modern understanding of functional literacy [4].

2.2 Design of the study

The study employed a complex of theoretical and empirical methods. The theoretical level comprised the systematic analysis of philosoph-

ical, psychological and pedagogical literature on functional literacy and the competence approach; the comparative analysis of international frameworks, including PISA, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 and the European key-competence frameworks, and of national curricular documents of the Republic of Uzbekistan; and synthesis and modelling for the construction of the structural-functional model of native language teaching oriented toward functional literacy. The empirical level comprised qualitative pedagogical analysis: content analysis of native language textbooks and lesson materials with respect to the representation of life-competency-oriented tasks; observation of native language lessons in general secondary education institutions conducted within the methodological cooperation of the university with regional schools; and reflective analysis of the experience of implementing competency-oriented tasks in teaching practice.

The qualitative design was chosen deliberately. The research question concerns the structure and the conditions of the phenomenon rather than its statistical distribution, and the object of modelling is the didactic system as a whole, which cannot be decomposed into independent variables without losing precisely those connections that the study seeks to describe. The limitation that follows from this choice is stated explicitly: the study does not measure the effect of the model on learners' test scores and does not claim a quantified gain in functional literacy. Its contribution lies in the theoretical description of the mechanism that connects life competencies with functional literacy and in the didactic specification of the conditions under which this mechanism operates.

3 Results

3.1 Functional literacy in the structure of native language teaching

The analysis shows that functional literacy as it is realised in native language lessons has a four-component structure. The first component is reading literacy: the ability to extract, interpret, evaluate and reflect on information from continuous, non-continuous, mixed and multiple texts. The second is written productive literacy: the ability to construct written utterances of different genres, including description, narration, reasoning, essay and official document, adequate to communicative purposes. The third is oral-communicative literacy: the ability to participate in dialogue, discussion and monologue utterance while observing communicative norms. The fourth is information-management literacy: the ability to search, select, transform and responsibly use information, including information in digital formats. All four compon-

ents are, in essence, language-bound manifestations of life competencies: critical thinking appears in reading, creativity in writing, cooperation in oral communication, and digital and informational competencies in information management.

Component	Manifestation in language activity	Corresponding life competency
Reading literacy	Extracting, interpreting, evaluating and reflecting on information in continuous, non-continuous and multiple texts	Critical thinking
Written productive literacy	Constructing texts of different genres adequate to the communicative purpose	Creativity, self-management
Oral-communicative literacy	Participating in dialogue, discussion and monologue in accordance with communicative norms	Communication, cooperation
Information-management literacy	Searching, selecting, transforming and responsibly using information, including digital	Digital and informational competency

Table 1 Components of functional literacy and their manifestation in native language activity

3.2 The structural-functional model

Compiled by the author on the basis of the PISA framework and the analysed competency frameworks. On this basis a structural-functional model of native language teaching oriented toward functional literacy was constructed. The model includes four blocks. The target block defines the goal, namely the functionally literate personality capable of using language resources for life tasks, together with the social order and the methodological approaches: competence-based, learner-centred, activity-based and contextual. The content block integrates linguistic knowledge, functional-textual experience in the form of a typology of texts and speech genres, life competencies, including communicative, cooperative, critical-thinking, creative, digital and self-management competencies, and value attitudes toward the native language and national culture. The procedural block comprises the didactic strategies: contextual and situational tasks, work with authentic and functional texts, project and case methods, integrative tasks linking language with other knowledge domains, interactive forms such as cooperative learning, discussion, debate and role play, and criterion-referenced assessment oriented toward the application of knowledge. The evaluative block monitors functional literacy indicators through

performance tasks, portfolios, formative feedback and self-assessment.

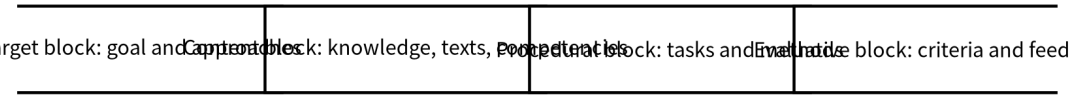


Figure 1 Structural-functional model of native language teaching oriented towards functional literacy
Compiled by the author.

The central theoretical claim of the model is that the development of life competencies functions as the mechanism that raises functional literacy: each competency, when formed, transfers linguistic knowledge from the declarative to the functional plane. Communicative competency converts knowledge of the language system into adequate speech behaviour; critical-thinking competency converts reading skills into text evaluation and reflection; creative competency converts writing exercises into productive written activity; cooperative competency converts classroom interaction into socially organised language use; digital competency converts information skills into responsible information behaviour; and self-management competency converts learning activity into autonomous lifelong learning. The model is therefore not a list of desirable additions to the lesson but an explanation of why certain additions work while others remain decorative.

3.3 Pedagogical conditions

The analysis made it possible to formulate six pedagogical conditions for the effective implementation of the model. First, the lesson must be saturated with life-context tasks: tasks have to model real situations of language use, such as writing a request, comparing information from two sources or preparing a project presentation, instead of formal exercises on rules. Secondly, the diversity of texts must be ensured: systematic work with continuous and non-continuous texts, including tables, schemes, infographics and media texts, in accordance with the PISA typology develops reading literacy in its functional dimension. Thirdly, activity must be productive: learners have to create their own speech products regularly, in the form of essays, projects and presentations, which requires creative competency. Fourthly, dialogicity and cooperation must be built into the lesson: discussion, debate and cooperative forms develop oral-communicative and cooperative competencies simultaneously.

Fifthly, integrativity must be achieved: linking native language tasks with knowledge from other subjects and with digital environments ensures the transfer of competencies beyond the subject. Sixthly, assessment must be criterion-referenced and formative: explicit criteria and feedback orient learners toward the functional quality of speech activity rather than toward the formal correctness of reproduction. The observed and analysed lessons confirm the internal logic of the model: where these conditions are realised as a system, learners display noticeably higher readiness to comprehend unfamiliar texts, to argue a position and to construct extended written utterances; where teaching remains reproductive, formal linguistic knowledge does not convert into functional behaviour. This finding is consistent with the international evidence that competency-oriented curricula are associated with higher functional literacy outcomes [13].

4 Discussion and conclusion

4.1 Discussion

The proposed model resolves the contradiction formulated in the introduction by changing the unit of instructional design. In a grammar-centric lesson the unit is the rule, and the lesson succeeds when the rule is reproduced; in a functionally oriented lesson the unit is the communicative task, and the lesson succeeds when the task is accomplished with the appropriate linguistic resources. This shift does not abolish linguistic knowledge, since a learner who does not know the resources cannot select them; it changes the order of instruction and the criterion of success. The grammar rule becomes a means that is introduced when the task requires it, and the assessment focuses on the adequacy of the speech product rather than on the reproduction of the paradigm. The same logic explains why the development of life competencies is not an additional burden on the language curriculum: the competencies are the mechanism through which linguistic knowledge becomes functional.

The limitation of the study consists in the qualitative character of the empirical material. The observation of lessons and the content analysis of textbooks document the state of practice and the internal coherence of the model, but they do not establish its effect on measurable functional literacy. The next stage of the research should therefore include a longitudinal design with pre- and post-measurement of reading literacy on PISA-type tasks, a comparison of classes working under the model with classes following the traditional curriculum, and the design of diagnostic instruments for monitoring the functional literacy of learners of different educational levels.

4.2 Conclusion

Functional literacy in native language teaching is an integrative personality formation realised through reading, written-productive, oral-communicative and information-management components; it cannot be reduced to linguistic erudition and is measured by the ability to apply language resources in life tasks. Life competencies, namely communicative, cooperative, critical-thinking, creative, digital and self-management competencies, constitute the developmental mechanism of functional literacy: their purposeful formation converts linguistic knowledge into functional language use. The proposed structural-functional model, comprising target, content, procedural and evaluative blocks, together with the six pedagogical conditions formulated above, provides a didactically complete pathway for enhancing learners' functional literacy in native language lessons.

Practical recommendations follow directly from the model. The system of lesson tasks should be redesigned toward life-context functional tasks; authentic and non-continuous texts should be included systematically; project and case methods should be used to organise productive speech activity; and criterion-referenced assessment of functional speech products should replace the assessment of reproduced rules. Teacher professional development programmes should likewise orient native language teachers toward the competency paradigm, since the model requires a change in the teacher’s own understanding of what constitutes a successful lesson.

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