

UN International Literacy Day

Knowing how to read and write is a very important factor in most people's lives. But some people never learn these skills. How can we make sure that everybody gets the opportunity to become literate?

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. literacy
2. illiteracy
3. poverty
4. a skill
5. Western countries
6. accessible
7. a device
8. knowledge

Definition

- a. a machine that has a specific purpose
- b. an ability to do something well
- c. the ability to read and write
- d. easy for people to get and to use
- e. the fact of not being able to read or write
- f. facts that you know; information you get from experience or study
- g. countries in the west part of the world, especially in North America and the west of Europe
- h. the situation of not having enough money for basic needs

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Have you ever travelled to a country with a language that you don't speak? If so, perhaps you had trouble understanding the most basic things: signs, instructions, documents, packaging. Maybe you felt quite powerless. This is just a simple example that gives us a small idea of how hard life must be for a person who is unable to read. Illiteracy is a major problem around the world. To acknowledge the huge efforts of people working in this field, the United Nations celebrates International Literacy Day every 8 September.

What is UN International Literacy Day?

Since 1967, this annual celebration has brought attention to people in the world who don't know how to read or write. It highlights ways to combat this problem and the huge progress that has been made. Every 8 September, UNESCO holds an awards ceremony in Paris in which prizes are given to individuals and organisations who work hard to increase literacy around the world.

How big is the problem?

It is estimated that around 14 per cent of the global population is illiterate. Within that statistic, there is some good news and some bad news. On a positive note, the levels of illiteracy have fallen a lot in recent decades (in just 1980, world illiteracy was at 43 per cent!). However, there are still enormous differences between regions. In sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia, illiteracy remains around 30 per cent.

What are the consequences of illiteracy?

There is a strong connection between illiteracy and poverty. People who can read and write have an enormous advantage over those who can't when it comes to studying and training. This means that literate people generally earn more money and even enjoy better health. The UN also reports more negative attitudes towards women in societies with lower literacy levels.

What is the situation for women and girls?

A study by the UN showed that almost 83 per cent of women and girls are able to read and write. However, two-thirds of all illiterate people in the world are female. This problem is due to factors such as insufficient educational opportunities for girls or the tradition in some countries for girls to get married at a young age. Many organisations work to try to empower women and girls by teaching them literacy skills.

What is the situation for men and boys?

The same UN study showed that, internationally, 90 per cent of men and boys are able to read and write. However, in many Western countries, girls generally show better literacy than boys. Experts suggest that this is due to education techniques which don't always suit boys, as well as the opinion among some boys that reading and writing are 'girly' things to do.

How is technology changing things?

In the digital era, learning to read and write has become more accessible, with the internet and the popularity of devices like computers and smartphones. UNESCO suggests that literacy has become more important than ever as the world changes towards 'knowledge-based societies' which depend on communication rather than creating physical products.

What is the future of literacy?

Some experts argue that we need to change our idea of literacy. These days, knowing how to read is a limited skill if the same person doesn't know how to use a computer or smartphone. Some suggest that we need to expand the idea of literacy to include skills such as knowing how to use a web browser, create a document on a computer or even send a text message by phone.

How can I participate?

Many libraries and universities organise events to celebrate International Literacy Day, often inviting famous writers to participate. Check out #LiteracyDay on social media to see what's happening in your region.

Tasks

Task 1

Match the explanations (a–f) to the information (1–6).

Information

1. 14%
2. 83%
3. 1967
4. 1980
5. knowledge
6. technology

Explanation

- a. the year when the first International Literacy Day happened
- b. a year when 43 per cent of the world's population was illiterate
- c. the percentage of women in the world who are literate
- d. the percentage of people in the world who are illiterate
- e. an element which has had a big influence on literacy levels
- f. the most important element in most societies these days

Task 2

Circle the best answer.

1. If we think of times when we have, we can imagine how it feels to be illiterate.
a. studied b. travelled c. looked at instructions
2. At the Literacy Day event in Paris, people and groups receive
a. awards b. books c. recommendations
3. Since 1980, illiteracy has fallen by around the world.
a. 29 per cent b. 43 per cent c. 30 per cent
4. When people can't read or write, a common consequence is that they
a. feel angry b. are poor c. don't travel
5. About of all illiterate people are female.
a. 50 per cent b. 83 per cent c. 66 per cent
6. In Western countries, male levels of literacy are female levels of literacy.
a. the same as b. worse than c. better than
7. The internet has made it for many people to learn to read and write.
a. more possible b. more difficult c. more expensive
8. It is suggested that our definition of 'literacy' needs to
a. stay as it is now b. be more specific c. get bigger

Discussion

What is the best way to learn to read and write in a different language?

Answers

Preparation task

1. c
2. e
3. h
4. b
5. g
6. d
7. a
8. f

Task 1

1. d
2. c
3. a
4. b
5. f
6. e

Task 2

1. b
2. a
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. b
7. a
8. c