



REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Ogniyana Georgieva-Teneva, DLitt, NBU

of Ph.D. thesis for awarding of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor of Philosophy” in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications – Media Discourse and Style)

Topic of the Ph.D. Thesis: “Media Literacy: Understanding and Use of Media Texts in Secondary School”

Author of the Ph.D. Thesis: Neli Ilieva Ilieva, full-time doctoral student in the Department “Press Journalism and Book Publishing” in the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, SU

Supervisor: Prof. Andreana Eftimova, DSc

Introduction of the doctoral student based on the submitted documents

Neli Ilieva graduated from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” with a specialization in Bulgarian Language and Literature and Secondary School Teaching. She holds a second specialization in Cultural Studies. Ilieva teaches Bulgarian Language and Literature at the secondary school level. She has been a senior teacher since 2013. Her professional career testifies to her commitment to persistently develop her philological and methodological expertise. Ilieva has authored 16 educational books: textbooks, study notebooks, books for teachers, test collections, and handbooks. She has been a doctoral student since 2018.

Formal characteristics of the dissertation thesis

The Ph.D. thesis submitted for evaluation comprises 234 pages, including the bibliography and appendices.

Evaluation of the qualities of the dissertation thesis

Against the backdrop of a media reality with innumerable sources of information, including some highly personalized ones, it is the skill to critically interpret a text that can ensure efficient social communication, as well as the neutralization of disinformation, fake news and manipulation, and constructive participation in public



life. For all those reasons, I believe that the topic of the dissertation thesis is both relevant and important. The very formulation of the topic is a success in its own right – it places the focus on an educational problem, which has so far been investigated only fragmentarily. In recent years, the scientific community working in the field of Bulgarian language teaching has intensified its research efforts into the problems of functional literacy, discourse competence, models of reading, and reception and critical understanding of texts, but there has still been no specific work dedicated exclusively to the understanding and use of media texts at the secondary school level. Neli Ilieva investigates, with new methods and on a new scale, a problem whose solution could guarantee students to achieve not only higher educational results, but also, in a far-reaching perspective, a more productive public life, greater individual success and more effective civic participation grounded in the skills of critical thinking, analytical reasoning and informed decision-making.

The introduction of the reviewed Ph.D. thesis complies with the requirements of the scientific genre of dissertation writing: it outlines the goals and objectives of the research, its scope and limitations. The general characteristic of the dissertation also features the formulation of the research thesis and hypothesis; however, their being presented in this particular order seems to result in a certain overlap between the research premises and its hypothesis. The selected research instruments are relevant to the ideas of the study and can be defined as operational. The dissertation thesis is organised in four chapters, each structured in a clear, logical sequence.

Neli Ilieva's pedagogical experience provides a good starting point for conducting research aimed at assessing accurately the characteristics of secondary school students' media literacy and at determining the interdependence between a person's viewpoint on a discussion issue and their degree of understanding of a media text.

The two main content components of the dissertation – the theoretical and the experimental – are appropriately balanced and closely interconnected. The first one covers various fields of the humanities related to mass communication, media culture and media texts from a semiotic, linguistic and educational perspective. The studied sources are up to date, and the doctoral student demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the specialised literature, thus providing a solid theoretical foundation for the problematisation of media communication in its relationship to culture (Umberto Eco); the definition of the concepts of mass communication, media culture, mass culture, mediamorphosis (Denis McQuail, Neil Postman); the technological advances in the development of mass media (Kevin Williams); social mythmaking (Roland Barthes); the impact on public opinion, the propaganda function of the media (Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays); contemporary aspects of media gratification, etc. The overview of the key theoretical works contributes to the construction of a complex scientific conceptualisation of the media text and its educational context. The author's approach to the theoretical sources demonstrates her skills in classifying, accurately summarising



and rigorously analysing the scientific information, while at the same time she seeks to evolve and apply her own evaluation filter.

The experimental part of the dissertation thesis investigates the media literacy of secondary school students and adds value to the research field along the following lines:

- The genesis and main stages in the development of media studies are outlined;
- Successive scientific studies on media education are presented in a diachronic and synchronic perspective;
- Media education is seen within the framework of the competency approach, the European Union policies and the international study PISA.

The dissertation rationale requires a definition and problematisation of the concept of *text*, as well as identification of the specific characteristics of the *media text*. Having successfully accomplished these tasks, Neli Ilieva proceeds to address the central subject of her research: students' understanding of media texts. Informed by the analysis of the Bulgarian educational context, the dissertation examines media competencies in relation to school curricula and textbooks and investigates media texts as a study discipline.

The design of the experimental research is original and thought out in great detail; the criteria for text selection are defined precisely; the use of the survey method is cogently argued – the questions and tasks included in it guarantee a detailed understanding of the students' receptive abilities.

The first part of the experiment examines students' reading skills as applied to a series of Internet texts on the same issue. I highly commend Neli Ilieva for every step in conducting the experiment: the selection and analysis of the texts, the choice of methodology, the compilation of a corpus of questions, the detailed analysis of the elicited responses, the formulation of summaries.

The study of media literacy through a text with great information density, which constitutes the second part of the pedagogical experiment, is methodologically sound; the survey questions are relevant to the research goals, their content and structure are logically validated. The students' answers are meticulously analysed, with a wide range of problematisations. In keeping with the systematic approach, which is characteristic of the entire Ph.D. thesis, the conclusions drawn by Neli Ilieva directly follow from the collected empirical data and their interpretation.

I would like to extend the list of the main achievements mentioned so far by highlighting a few additional points:

- The close attention paid to the visual language of media communication and the ways in which students decode and understand it contributes to gaining deeper insights into their media literacy;



- The finding that secondary school students demonstrate a better awareness of literary genres, but not of journalistic genres, is an important one because it raises, albeit discreetly, the question often discussed in professional circles about the actual implementation of the Bulgarian language curriculum in the normatively assigned numbers of teaching hours;
- The conclusion about the respondents' lack of skill to correctly interpret a text with a humorous intent draws attention to the problem of the literal understanding of the text and misunderstanding / lack of understanding of the second (third, etc.) semantic plane, about their inability to discern nuances of meaning or to carry out successful interpretive reading.

The style of the Ph.D. thesis is precise, the discussion is clearly presented, with well-planned graphic highlights. Data visualizations – figures and tables – are carefully prepared and contribute to the overall communicativeness of the text.

The dissertation summary mostly corresponds to the content of Ph.D. thesis. The only discrepancy is observed in the discussion of the contributions: in the full body of the thesis, the contribution points are not explicitly listed, whereas in the summary they are organised in a separate paragraph.

Contributions of the dissertation research

The Ph.D. thesis

- discusses media literacy from the perspective of modern humanistic studies;
- develops a research methodology appropriate for the research goals;
- collects authentic data on the media literacy of today's secondary school students;
- draws well-founded conclusions regarding the levels of media text understanding in secondary education;
- presents a motivated proposal for uniting and coordinating the efforts of specialists, communities and institutions with the purpose of developing a long-term strategy to remedy the current unsatisfactory state of media literacy;
- provides scientific material that can serve as a starting point for further research on media literacy problems, especially with regard to finding new ways to overcome the existing deficits;
- the observed low levels of media literacy are viewed as a possible incentive for taking administrative steps to improve the normative documentation, as well as textbooks and teachers' professional qualifications.

The positive aspects of the dissertation thesis as highlighted above can be viewed as a solid investment towards gaining a better knowledge into the modern phenomenology of reading, the unique “construal” of the text in the mind of the recipient with typical semantic reductionism, with the incorrect or uncritical perception of information and



the resulting risks of easy manipulation and ultimately, the construction of a worldview with many unlit fields and distorted spaces.

Questions

- Would the author of the Ph.D. thesis consider it plausible to propose a general typology of extracurricular prerequisites and subjective prerequisites, which may determine students' incorrect decoding of media texts, given the assumption that the student is at the center of the educational system and that the goal is individualization of education?
- Does the doctoral student have any observations on the reception of media texts that are read by students' free choice and other media texts that are set for obligatory reading?

Recommendations

If the author of the Ph.D. thesis decides to research further the topic of media literacy, I would recommend that she construe a methodological model for the development of students' competencies in the context of communication with media texts and publish it as a monograph, the first part of which would comprise the present work (with updated content, if necessary).

Publications and participation in scientific forums

The doctoral student has 6 publications on the topic of the dissertation thesis, all in prestigious journals with national visibility. One of the publications is based on a paper presented at a scientific conference.

Conclusion

The dissertation thesis is undoubtedly of a significant scientific and applied value. It convincingly attests to the importance of the teacher's experience in researching the problems of secondary education. I give a positive assessment of the reviewed Ph.D. thesis and vote in favour of awarding Neli Ilieva Ilieva the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy" in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications – Media Discourse and Style).

Date: 15. 09. 2022

Reviewer: Ognyana Gerogieva-Teneva