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## **Review of Doctoral Thesis**

**Author:** Irena Raikova

**Title:** Formation of Socio-Cultural and Communicative Language Competences in Teaching Bulgarian Language and Literature in Grades 1-4

**Professional Strand:** 1.3. Pedagogy of Teaching (Methodology of teaching Bulgarian Language and Literature in the initial stage of education)

**Supervisor:** Prof. PdD Neli Ivanova

### **General information about the doctoral student**

Irena Raikova's qualification and entire work experience are directly related to the professional strand to which the doctoral thesis under review appertains. The remarkable synchronicity between practical activities and research interests is a sign of purposefulness and a constant pursuit of self-improvement - Irena Raikova started as an educator, moved to the position of primary teacher and very quickly became a senior teacher of English. Her work as an eTwinning ambassador supports the opening of the primary school to strategic partnerships and exchange of experiences through project-based learning. She has improved her professional competence by attending various courses. In 2018, she was awarded the fourth professional qualification degree. She participated in various scientific forums and projects and is winner of many prestigious awards and distinctions. All of this serves as proof that Irena Raikova as a dynamic person with diverse pedagogical experience and her professional biography can be regarded as a favorable context for the proposed thesis.

### **Doctorate data**

Irena Raikova was enrolled for part-time doctoral studies in the Department of Didactics with order RD 20-269 of the rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Her training progressed successfully, the doctoral thesis was discussed at a departmental meeting on March 14, 2023, which decided on its advancement to public defense.

### **General description of the doctoral thesis**

The thesis consists of 327 pages distributed in appropriate proportions into introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography and appendices. The bibliography consists of 123 source materials, of which 107 are in Bulgarian, and the rest – in English. The visualizations are presented in 42 charts and 35 tables. The 11 appendices consist of survey cards, expert assessment cards, didactic tests, worksheets and a literature lesson system observation card. The overall graphic appearance of the thesis is very neat and clear.

### **Benefits of the doctoral thesis**

The teaching of Bulgarian Language and Literature (BLL) today takes place in a communicative context with a permanent tendency towards unsatisfactory functional literacy, problematic critical reception of an unfamiliar text, confusion of strict stylistic boundaries between informal and official communication, vocabulary deficiency, reduction of linguistic self-control. Pedagogical reflection seeks to take into account these characteristic features of today's linguistic reality, to keep up with its linguistic rationalization, to harmonize it with the educational goals and tasks, and respectively, to propose appropriate approaches for the realization of these goals and tasks. The thesis under review takes a step in this direction. The two types of competence it focuses on are crucial for BLL education with a view to achieving successful social and personal realization of students, while the methodological question raised is logically the focal point of a series of studies - it is a topical and pressing issue of extreme importance. The development of Irena Raikova is a well-thought-out and significant response in the professional dialogue about the diagnosis and development of socio-cultural and communicative language competences regarded as a guarantee for successful language communication, and in a more distant perspective - for the acquisition of a cultural identity corresponding to modern cognitive, humanist, sociocultural and civil values.

The thesis under review is an applied pedagogical research. Its structure reflects the author's ability to organize the source material with lucid argumentative consistency. The connections between individual structural parts are logically well-founded, ensuring the coherence of the text and the uniform systematicity concerning the scope of the topic. The material is harmoniously organized, on the one hand, with excellent coordination between the goals, tasks and hypothesis, and on the other, with the presentation of theoretical and practical experience.

The introduction points out the relevance of the dissertation topic and the social benefit of its development. The position of the researched problematics in the normative educational documentation, as well as the object, the goal, the tasks, the hypothesis, the methods and stages of the empirical research, are all accurately presented.

The conceptual treatment of the thesis bears the features of classical methodological research. The terminological apparatus was specified by following the diachronic dynamics in the theoretical views in accordance with scientific authorities and established institutional reference points. The concepts of *competence* and *competency* are differentiated, the meaning of each of the three competence domains (*knowledge, skill, attitude*) is accurately formulated and their projection onto the normative documents is clearly defined. The definition of working concepts goes beyond the usual procedure of ascribing a fixed meaning to the terms and confidently ventures into the sphere of scientific investigation. It is focused on the linguistic studies which have set the perspectives for the modern understanding of *communicative, sociolinguistic, strategic* and *discourse competence*. The thesis justifiably highlights fundamental works by Noam Chomsky and Dell Hymes, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain, Jan van Eyck, etc., which have had a strong impact both on today's scientific reflection on language as a socio-cultural phenomenon, and on the practice of teaching BLL in general. Alongside these globally recognized masterminds of linguistic knowledge, the thesis also mentions Bulgarian philological and pedagogical studies - thoroughly researched and exhaustively presented, at times to the point of scrupulousness. Besides providing a definition for specific concepts, which include *selective, transpositive, conversion strategy* etc., the thesis further interprets more general concepts such as *culture, language, cognitive processes, mental operations, method, intercultural awareness, interactive methods and techniques* etc. This effort manifests an impulse to provide a stable scientific foundation for one's own methodological modeling and empirical research. Additionally, the theoretical plan of the thesis discusses the relationship between language and thinking.

The competence approach is considered with regard to teaching BLL in primary schools. The interconnected aspects of socio-cultural and communicative language competence and the interdependencies between them and other types of competence are comprehensively and thoroughly presented. The prologue's comprehensiveness

can also be observed in relation to the communicative tasks and speech production implied in the researched educational stage. The normative documents of the Ministry of Education and Culture related to the topic are presented in meticulous detail and at times with excessive punctuality and extensive quotations. The didactic principles of teaching, the determinants, the forms and functions of pedagogical communication, and the overall organization of the teaching process are also thoroughly described. The treatment's exposition traces popular works on interactive methods and techniques, presents the traditional methods of education, the types of lessons and tasks, the age-related characteristics of the students etc. This part of the doctoral thesis, although perhaps developed with a certain overdose of detail, is the necessary starting point to the most essential and original aspects in one's research.

The thesis itself has two main aspects: presentation of conducted empirical research and analysis of its results.

The empirical study is described with the same precision that characterizes the entire work. The focus groups, location and type of schools are carefully outlined. I would like to highlight the fact that the scope of research includes not only teachers and students, but also parents. The stages of the study - preliminary, ascertaining, formative and concluding - are accurately mapped out.

Undoubtedly, one of the most valuable achievements of the research is the answer to the question of how to form sociocultural and communicative linguistic competences. The provided answer is theoretically grounded and practically developed in detail. It includes the practices of motivating students to work, taking into account their interests (embodied in numerous tasks, most of them designed by the author, for example, "Question of the Week", "Invisibility Cloak" etc.), working on maintaining their attention and stimulating their memory, on developing the processes of thinking and speech through extremely diverse and interesting tasks related to both Bulgarian language and literature studies. This is namely one of the outstanding contributions of the thesis. Resourcefulness, methodical consistency and systematicity - this is the most concise expression of my satisfaction with the elaborated project for development of the researched competencies. Special attention deserves the inclusion of students in appropriate dynamic activities and games, project-oriented activities, etc. The preparation of electronic resources for distance learning is also a significant achievement.

The empirical research includes data from a survey with teachers and parents, aiming to establish the activity and interests related to reading, the effectiveness of teaching and its methods, the various difficulties and drawbacks. The analysis of this empirical data leads to a general conclusion about the level of the developed skills. The inferences coincide with the data from other studies, namely - an average level of competences. Another valuable point in the analysis conducted by Irena Raikova is the differentiation of the success rate in relation to different aspects of the competences - mastery of speech etiquette, orientation in a given speech situation and the choice of adequate language means, skills for acquiring and interpreting information, productive and reproductive speech skills, recognition of cultural characteristics etc.

The feedback that 10 experts provided in their reviews of the conducted research activity upholds the validity of the thesis. Attracting external reviewers with serious pedagogical experience for the assessment of the doctoral thesis is a guarantee for an objective evaluation of the work done – insofar as the "outside" view is usually impartial and interprets the object of observation in a new perspective and at a different level of competence.

In her doctoral thesis, Irena Raikova demonstrates research skills at different levels: conceptual, analytical, interpretative, descriptive, evaluative. Their successful combination makes the developed research a significant methodological achievement with a number of contributions:

- An important aspect of teaching BLL is investigated via new means;
- An original model for diagnosing the sociocultural and communicative language competences of students from 1st to 4th grade is proposed;
- New facts about the studied competences are obtained, which not only confirm, but also specify already existing observations, including those conducted in PISA and PIRLS studies;
- The problematic areas in the acquisition of the researched competences are determined;
- An original methodological approach for developing the sociocultural and communicative linguistic competences of students from 1st to 4th grade is proposed; the specified approach manifests a markedly contributory character and expands the well-known possibilities for developing the sociocultural and communicative linguistic

competences of students;

- The presented approach is also applicable to distance learning;
- The modern roles of the primary teacher are outlined;
- The mathematical and statistical methods for processing the data from the

empirical study are correct;

- The text of the thesis is provided with well-designed graphic material;
- The research is relevant to the documents of the European Union in the domain of language communication and its educational mastery in schools.

- Clear and precise language;
- Extensive bibliography;
- Proper layout of appendices.

The abstract corresponds to the doctoral thesis, adequately conveying its structure and content.

There are a total of nine publications on the topic of the doctoral thesis, two of which are included in Web of science periodicals, and the rest – in various scientific collections. The results of the research activity have also been popularized in conference papers presented at various pedagogical forums.

In conclusion: I give a positive assessment of the reviewed thesis, as it contributes to a more complete understanding of the socio-cultural and communicative language competences of primary school students and provides valuable theoretical and practical experience for their improvement. The set goal has been realized: a system for the formation and development of socio-cultural and communicative language competences has been formulated, substantiated and officially approved as applicable to both face-to-face and distance learning. On the basis of the in-depth theoretical knowledge and conceptual solidity, as well as the quality of empirical research, conclusions and inferences manifested in the thesis, I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the academic degree "Doctor" to Irena Hristova Raikova in professional strand 1.3. Pedagogy of Teaching (Methodology of teaching Bulgarian Language and Literature in the initial stage of education).

Sofia, May 15, 2023

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