

REVIEW

by

by Assoc. Prof. Penka Todorova Kaneva, PhD,

**“St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo
of the materials submitted for participation in a competition
for the academic position of “professor”
at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
in the professional field 1.3. Pedagogy of Education in...**

(Methodology of foreign language education – preschool and primary school age)

Grounds for submitting the review: By order № RD 38-453 of 25.09.2020 of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” I have been appointed a member of the scientific jury in the competition for the academic position of “professor” in the professional field 1.3. Pedagogy of Education in... (Methodology of foreign language education – preschool and primary school age), announced for the needs of the “Department of Preschool and Media Pedagogy” at the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts in the State Gazette, issue 67 of 28.07.2020, with correction in the State Gazette, issue 77 of 01.09.2020, and on the faculty and university websites. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ekaterina Nedelcheva Sofronieva from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” is the only candidate in the competition.

I. GENERAL REVIEW OF THE SUBMITTED MATERIALS

1. Information about the candidate

The set of documents submitted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ekaterina Sofronieva for the competition includes: a filled in application form; a curriculum vitae; copies of her diplomas for master's degree and doctor's degree; certificates and documents for her work experience and academic position; a list of 36 publications, their full content and their content in a summary form; a filled in form for the fulfillment of the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b of the Law for Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria; reference to the citations; reference for the original scientific contributions; declaration of co-authorship. Documents, which provide information on the teaching experience of the candidate, her participation in national and international projects (as a leader / team member / trainer / collaborator); and her qualifications, which upgrade and expand her professional knowledge and experience in various fields, have been submitted as well. The appendices also

include two reviews of her books, published in refereed scientific journals in Bulgaria, as well as the required copies of the advertisements for the position, published in the State Gazette.

All documents submitted by Assoc. Prof. Sofronieva comply with the minimum national requirements (under Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of the Law for DASRB) and the additional requirements of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” for holding the academic position of “professor” in the scientific and professional field of the competition.

2. Information about the candidate

Ekaterina Sofronieva graduated as a Master of Arts in English philology from the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 1992, and in 2001 she qualified as a teacher of early foreign language teaching at the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the same university. In 2012, she received a doctoral degree in psychology of orientation and learning process at the University of Rome “Sapienza”, Italy. Right upon her graduation from the master's programme, she was employed as a part-time assistant in English at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, where, with some interruption, she worked until 2005. From 2005 until now she has been a full-time lecturer at the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education (currently renamed to “Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts”) and has held the positions of assistant, senior assistant and chief assistant in English. She has been appointed an associate professor of methodology of foreign language teaching – English since 2016.

Along with her work as a part-time lecturer, in the period 1994-2003, Ekaterina Sofronieva also held managerial positions in various international companies and participated in projects in the field of advertising, trade, transport, education, local government and others. Her work as a lecturer is complemented by her involvement in five educational projects as a participant in an international training for teaching modern languages in Vilnius, Republic of Lithuania; a trainer of students and teachers; an author of teaching materials designed on Sofia University projects; a lecturer in seminars at *Anglia Ruskin University* in the UK. In 2020, Assoc. Prof. Ekaterina Sofronieva developed and managed a research project at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” on the study of empathy in monolingual and bilingual environments.

The educational background and experience of the candidate, along with her multifaceted professional realization and various life quests, has led to her mastering at a different level of fluency 5 foreign languages - English, Spanish, Russian, Italian and Hindi. Logically she has become a firm and passionate supporter, promoter and certified teacher of

the narrative format model for early language learning, developed by Prof. Traute Taeschner, a scientist and lecturer at the University of Rome "La Sapienza". The model is based on a psycholinguistic approach, with an emphasis on the role of empathy and good communication in language learning. Moreover, Ekaterina Sofronieva introduces the model of the narrative format in the preparation of students from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" as teachers of foreign languages for children.

3. General review of the scientific work and achievements of the candidate

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ekaterina Sofronieva participates in the competition for a professor with 36 publications, which, by genre and indicators of the minimum national requirements, can be divided into: one monograph / indicator V /, one book based on her doctoral thesis / indicator G-5 /, four articles published in scientific journals, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information - Web of Science / indicator G-6 /, six articles and reports published in non-peer-reviewed journals with scientific review or publication in edited collective volumes / indicator G-7 /, eighteen chapters in collective monographs / indicator G-10 /, five university textbooks, three of which - in co-authorship / indicator E-20 / and one university workbook / indicator E-21 /.

She is the sole author of 11 publications and a co-author of 25. The contributions of individual authors in the co-authorship have been correctly indicated. The scientific production submitted for review does not include or repeat publications submitted in previous procedures for acquiring a scientific title and academic position; its quantitative dimensions exceed the requirements for participation in the competition, regulated in the minimum national requirements (under Art. 2b, para 2 and 3 of the Law for DASRB) and in the additional requirements of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for holding the academic position of "professor" in the scientific and professional field of the competition.

The publications can be divided into the following topical areas:

- Theory and practice of early language teaching – (№ 1-5, 9, 13, 19, 31, 32, 36);
- Factors for successful foreign language learning – (№ 8, 10-12, 14-20);
- Theory and practice of contemporary second language testing – (№ 21-30, 33-35);
- Empathy and communication in language education – (№ 1-5, 19, 31, 32, 35, 36);
- Language teaching and inclusive education – (№ 1, 6, 7).

The subject areas of research and publications of the candidate correspond to the subject area of the announced competition.

4. Review and assessment of the teaching experience of the candidate

The teaching experience of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ekaterina Sofronieva is great in scope; she lectures in many disciplines on the bachelor's and master's programmes of the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts and the Faculty of Classic and Modern Philology, as well as on the postgraduate courses for training teachers at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". The academic disciplines developed by her are in the field of psycholinguistics, theory and practice of foreign language teaching, teaching English and culture. Most of the training courses, prepared by the candidate are in English. Furthermore, Assoc. Prof. Sofronieva is reading lectures on six courses offered to the international students at Sofia University who are trained on the European "Erasmus +" programme for students' mobility.

5. Analysis of the content of the submitted publications and the scientific and practical achievements of the candidate in this competition

The monograph "Specific Features of Second Language Acquisition in Childhood. A Smile Matters." (Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2020) takes a central place in the scientific production of Ekaterina Sofronieva. It is an interdisciplinary study, dedicated to theoretical and practical aspects of early language learning, in which facts, phenomena, and processes are discussed in terms of both psychology of language acquisition and methodology of foreign language learning.

The author has based her research on the idea that successful language learning begins with the search for similarities, rather than differences in languages and language acquisition processes. She takes on this view point when conducting a study which aims at answering the question, "Why does the process of acquiring one's mother tongue not cause pain and suffering and why is learning a foreign language often perceived by children as an unbearable process in which they participate because they "should" and not because they "want to"?" Due to the the analysis and synthesis of the results of many scientific studies for the acquisition of native and foreign languages by children, amongst which her own research projects and projects, conducted by other experts, Ekaterina Sofronieva comes to the conclusion that the presence or absence of emotions when using a foreign language is one of the most important factors for successful language learning. The author convincingly opposes some clichés and stereotypes from the practice of language learning and states that communication does not begin and is not detected at the level of the individual word and that

non-verbal communication and emotions are an essential part of communication. In addition, preschool and primary school children rely to a great extent on non-verbal cues since their ability to express themselves is limited, especially if they need to do so in a foreign language. Therefore, memorization of words, phrases, poems or songs is not considered an indicator of language achievement in preschool children; rather, the evidence of their progress in language learning should be sought in their ability to take part in spontaneous communication and emotionally charged events in the new language.

Sofronieva's hypothesis is that children, trained by teachers with higher levels of empathy, achieve better learning outcomes in a foreign language than the other children. The results of the studies described in the first and second chapters of the monograph confirm this hypothesis. Furthermore, data from the author's own research show that higher empathy among teachers is also associated with greater use of gestures and other non-verbal means of communication in the oral interactions with children. The model for early language learning of children, developed by Prof. Traute Taeshner from the University of Rome "Sapienza", called the "Narrative Format Method" is an illustration and proof of the applicability of the presented innovative ideas. Its focus is not on the linguistic characteristics of the language, but on the emotional experience of mutually shared adventures and events in the target language.

Chapter three reviews studies on the acquisition of English and Bulgarian as a mother tongue, which support the idea of similarity between languages and processes of language acquisition; a connection between the theories of first and second language learning and the personal experience of the students has been sought. The scope of the author's research expands in the fourth chapter which offers analysis of studies on the processes of simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages by children.

The research described in chapter five is exceptionally valuable for the practice of language teaching since studies on effective language learning practices for inclusive education are very few in number. Sofronieva monitors the language acquisition of students and children with special educational needs, who are taught by the method of the Narrative Format in Bulgaria and registers remarkable language progress of the participants in the study, which: a) shows that language is an emotion, an experience, a complex system of verbal and non-verbal means of communication and b) proves the effectiveness and applicability of the model in inclusive education. Chapter six offers some interesting ideas for incorporating pedagogical observations into the teaching practice of students, and chapter seventh presents a comparative analysis between language teaching in the "traditional

classroom" and through the application of established, successful models. It defines the main characteristics of effective early language teaching, based upon this analysis.

A great merit of the monograph is the presentation and analysis of the results of a series of interrelated experimental studies in the field of language acquisition and early language learning, which support the argument that language learning is more than a study of the target language characteristics. The scientific achievements are presented in an understandable way and recommendations for early language learning, based on the research findings, are provided. They are extremely useful for the practice of language education.

Another contribution of the author is the definition of the characteristics of the good foreign language teacher, which are related to building a sense of self-efficacy, self-acceptance and self-affirmation, the ability to express empathic concern and to apply both verbal and non-verbal means of communication.

There are other publications of the author which are dedicated to the topic of the professional qualities of the foreign language teacher (publications № 1-5, 19, 31, 32, 36). Her approach is innovative in nature; it not only emphasizes different characteristics and defines different profiles of teachers on the teacher's behavioral scale, but also relates them to different psychological constructs (such as empathy, locus of control, etc.), which affect the motivation of teachers and the achievements of their students. Ekaterina Sofronieva implements the results of the conducted studies into her practice; she has developed teaching materials for students, who are taking the course in "Empathy and communication in language education" at university (publications № 31, 32, 35).

In addition, the author is interested in the factors which influence successful second language learning and which can increase the effectiveness of the pedagogical interaction. Results of experimental research, conducted by her in order to clarify the impact of different learning strategies and personal qualities of learners on their achievement in a second language, are presented at international scientific conferences and in the monograph, entitled "Let All Things Be Done unto Edifying. A Study of the Factors Influencing Successful Second Language Learning." (Sofia: SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" University Press, 2018). The book has been written in co-authorship with Prof. Todor Shopov, with an equal contribution of the two authors (publications № 8, 10-12, 14-20).

When evaluating the scientific achievements of the candidate as well as those which are related to her practice, it should be noted that she has saved no time or energy to spread the Narrative Format model and implement it into the language teaching of children in countries in the European Union (Bulgaria and Greece) and outside the European Community (India)

(publications № 1, 2, 19, 31, 32 and document 12, appendices 3, 11 and 12). The longitudinal studies, conducted in Bulgaria, are also related to her efforts to spread the NF model in the country. They evaluate and validate the application of the Narrative format as a model for integrating children and students with special educational needs into language interaction in the classroom (publications № 1, 6, 7).

A significant part of Ekaterina Sofronieva's publications is dedicated to the topic of educational measurement and application of the classical test theory in language education. The monograph "A Sower Went Forth to Sow... An Introduction to Classical Test Theory in the Teaching of Modern Languages." (Sofia: SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" University Press, 2016), written in co-authorship with Prof. Todor Shopov, reviews the main criteria for ensuring the quality of the test in a second language and offers a complete set of procedures for educational assessment (publications № 21-30). The two co-authors of the book declared equal contribution. Ekaterina Sofronieva shows the ability to apply the developed theory on this topic as well as on the issue of empathy, in real educational context; together with two other co-authors (Beleva and Simeonova) she designed and published a series of university textbooks (in three parts) which include tests for learning English and an assessment kit for the evaluation of students' academic achievements at the end of their language training on the BA programmes in "Preschool Education and Foreign Language Teaching", "Primary School Education and Foreign Language Teaching" and "Media Education and Artistic Communication" (publications № 33-35). Each author's contribution is precisely indicated in the published textbooks. Another contribution of the candidate is the adaptation of the scales "Empathy Quotient (EQ) and Systemizing Quotient", "Interpersonal Reactivity Index" (Davis, 1980) and "Cambridge Behavior Scale" (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004) as instruments which can be used by respondents whose native language is Bulgarian language (publications № 1, 2, 19, 31, 32).

In conclusion, I would like to mention that Assoc. Prof. Ekaterina Sofronieva's research, teaching and project work make her an in-depth researcher, a competent teacher and a zealous guardian of educational causes. She is a scientist known both at home and abroad and there is abundant evidence of this: her publications in referenced and indexed editions (4 in number); her participation in international conferences and lectures in educational workshops, as well as the noted citations of her works (15 in number), five of which are in scientific journals, referenced and indexed in a world-famous database (Web of Science) and two in publications in English language.

6. Critical remarks, recommendations and questions

I have no critical remarks on the work of Assoc. Prof. Sofronieva but I have two questions:

- Is it possible to apply the Narrative Format method in the language teaching of children with special educational needs who are part of a group or class in a mainstream school, without any need for additional individual work with them?
- What are her future research plans?

7. Conclusions on the application of the candidate

After I reviewed all the materials and scientific publications, submitted by the candidate for participation in the competition, and analyzed their significance and scientific contributions to the theory and practice of early language learning, I **confirm** that the achievements of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ekaterina Sofronieva meet the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b and the Regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” for holding the academic position of “professor” in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional field 1.3. Pedagogy of Education in.... (Methodology of foreign language education – preschool and primary school age) at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

I give my **positive** assessment of the candidacy.

II. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Based on the above, I **recommend** to the scientific jury to make a proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” for the election of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ekaterina Nedelcheva Sofronieva to the academic position of “professor” in the professional field 1.3. Pedagogy of Education in.... (Methodology of foreign language education – preschool and primary school age).

17.11.2020 r

Signature:

Assoc. Prof. Penka Kaneva, PhD