

REVIEW OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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on a dissertation on the topic: *The use of digital tools and resources in developing students’ skills to interpret literary texts in high schools with extensive study of English as a foreign language*, for holding Maria Metodieva Genova the Doctorate Degree in Scientific Field 1.3. Pedagogy of Foreign Language Teaching (Methodology of English Language Teaching)

Grounds for the production of the review: member of the Scientific Jury to secure the defense procedure, following Order# RD 38-338/23.07.2020 of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

Biographical information: Maria Genova is a graduate of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in English and Russian Philology. Immediately after graduating, she started teaching at the English Language School in Vidin and, since 1999 till present, she has been teaching at “Thomas Jefferson” Second English Language School, Sofia, where she is Teacher-in-Chief. She has been developing her professional competences during her work experience: she has had First Qualification Degree, the highest one, since 2003; she has participated in five language specializations abroad and two on-line courses; she has developed her digital competences in educational institutions in Bulgaria, abroad and online. Her involvement in project work is really intensive – she has participated in 11 projects on assessing materials and the quality of education, designing educational materials; she was coordinator of two Comenius and one Erasmus project. All of the above, contributes to moulding her expertise and is a manifestation of her reviews of textbooks, the design of tests for national assessment, the marking state matriculation exams, the coordination of an international examination centre, the organization of national competitions in English.

Doctoral Dissertation: Maria Genova is a doctoral student in Scientific Field 1.3. Pedagogy of Foreign Language Teaching (Methodology of English Language Teaching) at the Department for Information and In-Service Training of Teachers at Sofia University “St

Kliment Ohridski". She is a self-study doctoral degree student who worked under the supervision of Prof. Rossitsa Penkova, Dr. The PhD thesis was discussed and allowed to be defended during an extended session of the Department for Information and In-Service Training of Teachers at Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski" (Order# 19/20.07.2020). Doctoral dissertation procedure is followed and is in accordance with the Regulations for the conditions and requirements for holding doctoral degrees at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'.

Dissertation and abstract of the doctoral thesis: The dissertation is 291 pages, 272 of which comprise the main body and 104 pages comprise the appendices. The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The dissertation is accompanied by Corpora - Corpus A (Teacher's digital documents and resources) and Corpus B (Students' digital products), which are recorded in digital form. The text of the dissertation includes 66 figures and 51 tables. The bibliography contains 257 titles, 201 of which in Latin and 56 in Cyrillic, as well as 72 official documents of international and Bulgarian institutions

The topically of the chosen topic on the use of digital tools and resources in developing students' skills to interpret literary texts in high schools with extensive study of English as a foreign language derives from the priorities for developing literacy (related to a number of competences) and digitalization, which are in the focus of the educational policies on European and local level as well as worldwide.

In the introduction, Maria Genova points out the deciding factors for the choice of topic of the present study: the attitude and the needs of the learners at language schools, the limitations in the official documents regarding the instruction in foreign languages, the necessity of continuous training of pedagogical specialist to acquire ICT skills, the lack of effectively tested teaching pedagogical technologies which foster the skills for interpretation of literary texts. These factors can be used as arguments proving the necessity of conducting such a research study.

The author formulates the aim with precision and specifies the subject of the research. She sets objectives corresponding to the aim, correctly defines the hypothesis and selects suitable research methodology. The set parameters show solid knowledge in the scientific field, which is demonstrated in Chapter one of the dissertation as well. After reviewing the development of opinions on teaching and learning foreign languages through literature and digital technologies, Maria Genova presents working definitions of basic concepts on the topic of the dissertation. The valuable contribution of the review is that discussed theories, methods, strategies and summarized effective educational solutions are related to the current situation in our educational

context] ideas applicable in practice are shown, as well as good practices, which unfortunately are not applicable in our country. The author skillfully employs personal reflections and observations from her teaching experience in the arguments based on objective factors like official regulatory documents and the peculiarities of the 21st century. Furthermore, she demonstrates independent thinking skills and avers personal opinion: for example, “boring plot and themes, which are alien to the life of the teenagers in 21st century, and lead to unwillingness or even refusal to read” (p. 56); ‘motivating students to read extensively texts written a couple of centuries ago for native speakers is a cause doomed to failure’ (p. 56).

Chapter 2 presents the necessity for a new pedagogical technology in teaching a foreign language by means of an analysis of the learning setting using Dubbin & Olshtain’s model. The instruments for collecting data about the setting are two: retrospective notes of the teacher after instruction and a questionnaire on the students’ attitudes towards the teaching strategies and the subject matter in English in the 11th grade, i.e. the opinion of both learners and teachers is taken into consideration. Apart from the information on the state and the deficiency of the learning setting, the teaching pedagogical technology is justified with the idea of the leading role of the teachers in the integration of digital technologies in the classroom, as well as the necessity to possess certain ICT knowledge.

When designing the TPT, Maria Genova starts with Lazar’s well-known and tested material design and lesson planning model applicable to novels and short stories, used for both teaching L1 and L2. She follows the stages suggested by Lazar, but tests the effectiveness of her own methodological solutions: substitutes the traditional lectures in face-to-face modality and complicated meta-language with short video tutorials in a flipped classroom, discussions on a topic related to the main one in the literary work or PowerPoint presentations and video materials; uses film adaptations of literary works to provoke interest towards the discussed themes, introduces the main elements for analysis of films to assist students’ understanding of the plot and characters.

The tested TPT for teaching English through literature Approach, upgraded with digital tools and resources is illustrated successfully with a diagram which consists of three equally important and irreplaceable components: learning setting, teacher and student. It is underlined that to reach certain goals, however, i.e. significant results, there should be an intersection area,

(p. 95, Fig. 2.2). The TPT is described in a clear and concise manner] the possibility for deviation of some elements is underlined in case that the students' language skills and digital competences need to be adapted to the model. The OER and the digital resources designed by the author herself are included in the Corpora. A matrix of a Lesson plan, together with detailed Lesson plans from the three stages (aims, objectives, necessary materials, learning tasks, project work, etc.) are presented. Chapter three is devoted on the organization of the experiment. Information is given on the activities completed on each of the stages of the experiment (the pre-experimental study, at the beginning, while the study and post the study phases), the used instruments (surveys, observation notes, frames for self-assessment, tests), the description of the participants (students from the experimental and control groups) and the corresponding qualitative and quantitative methods of research (observation, survey, etc.). The authors, whose tools are used in the TPT, are diligently cited.

The instruments used during the *pre-experimental phase/stage* for studying the students' attitudes towards the content in the 11th and 12th class are designed by the author herself. The results motivate the candidate to design and test a new teaching pedagogical technology in order to overcome the students' unwillingness to study classical literary works in English. The planning and realization of the experimental programme is done after analyzing the data from the at-the-beginning of the study phase.

The steps in conveying the formative experiment (while the implementation stage) are presented both as an algorithm – succinctly and sequentially, as well as with a thorough description of its basic components and attention to details. This in itself is a significant contribution to practice, since it makes the designed model applicable not only by other pedagogical specialists but also suitable and possible in different languages. The acquired skills for interpretation of literary texts are evaluated during the post-implementation phase of the research study. The criteria, indicators and measurement instruments used are in accordance with the goals set in the syllabi for foreign languages. Convincing arguments are used to explain their choice; the method of their application during the three stages (testing of knowledge, skills and attitudes; self-assessment of literary competences; questionnaire) is described in details. Seeking further clarification, it is presented in Table 3.20 and Table 3.21.

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Contributions: The research study conducted by Maria Genova is of great significance and effectiveness for the modernization of teaching English through Literature Approach in language schools with extensive classes. I totally agree with the listed by the candidate scientific contributions, three of which are in theoretical in nature, while four are practical in nature. They correspond to the accomplished results of her research study and illustrate its topical ideas.

Publications and participation in scientific forums: Six articles on the topic of the dissertation are presented: two are published in international online journals in English and four are presented at scientific conferences around the country. Maria Genova has enclosed a list of four other publications in English on similar topics. Taking this into consideration, she has fulfilled and even surpassed the requirement for a doctoral student.

Notes, recommendations and questions: In my opinion, the tested and proven effectiveness of the TPT for interpretation of literary works is applicable not only in teaching EFL, but in teaching foreign languages at large. Some of its components can be included in teaching Bulgarian language and literature in high schools. That's why I recommend that the doctoral student publish a book with the elements from her model that are applicable in practice. That will definitely make the model accessible to a larger number of pedagogical specialists and researchers.

Conclusion: On the grounds of the above said, I am firmly convinced that the presented by Maria Metodieva Genova dissertation on the topic *The use of digital tools and resources in developing students' skills to interpret literary texts in high schools with extensive study of English as a foreign language* consists of enough scientific contributions for the foreign language (English language) methodology. The achieved results correspond to all the

requirements of Statute for the Development of the Academic Staff in Bulgaria. That's why I give my positive vote and recommend that the honourable Scientific Jury award Maria Metodieva Genova Educational and Scientific Degree 'Doctor' in Scientific Field 1.3. Pedagogy of Foreign Language Teaching (Methodology of English Language Teaching).

30. 08. 2020

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Chapter three is devoted on the organization of the experiment. Information is given on the activities completed on each of the stages of the experiment (the pre-experimental study, at the beginning, while the study and post the study phases), the used instruments (surveys, observation notes, frames for self-assessment, tests), the description of the participants (students from the experimental and control groups) and the corresponding qualitative and quantitative methods of research (observation, survey, etc.).The authors, whose tools are used in the TPT, are diligently cited.