

## REVIEW

Of the PhD thesis **Integrating Applied Linguistics Approaches and Modern competences in the ESP courses for students of Agricultural Science and Arts**,  
by Bardha Gashi, Doctoral Candidate in Research Field 2.1 Philology.

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### **Fundamental and applied significance of the research topic**

The topic of Bardha Gashi's dissertation is approaches to organizing and delivering ESP courses for students of Music, Cinema, and Agriculture at the Haxhi Zeka University in Kosovo. In an extensive review of researches on the topic, the candidate reveals her understanding of the fact that each language course should start by studying the needs of the learners. Therefore, she conducts her research with her day-to-day duties in mind. The University of Haxhi Zeka has introduced courses in ESP quite recently and the right approach is to investigate at the outset so as to achieve maximal results for the students. The fact that designing curricula and syllabi is done with the students' best interests in mind speaks volumes about the learner-centered methodology of this university. Particularly praiseworthy is combining the academic development of the staff with placing syllabus design on a solid academic ground.

The candidate demonstrates familiarity with several aspects of needs analysis, presented at different parts of the dissertation. Major texts have been included in her review – unfortunately in a fashion that does not make it clear which model is selected. From the research it transpires that the concept of needs analysis is interpreted as what students feel like before, during and after the course. Each professional can adopt the definition that serves her purposes best. However, in a doctoral thesis the author is expected to evolve a definition of the basic terms from the literary review. No part of the dissertation is dedicated to defining her main terms and this certainly is a weakness of the presentation.



A second significant concept in the research is English for Specific Purposes (ESP), since this type of course is required of the candidate by the University. A very good analytical classification is presented of the theories that underpin ESP research: supervariety, continuum and discourse-oriented philosophy (p. 25). This is the analytical mode of presenting the literature review expected in a PhD thesis. Technically, Bardha Gashi does not say whether she adopts any of these basic principles, but good understanding and extensive reading into the subject is demonstrated.

At the start of the study the hypothesis is formulated that students whose knowledge of GE (English for general purposes) is at a lower level are unable to proceed with ESP. This is a wide-spread attitude among language teachers but in the framework of the research design, it does sound like a loaded expectation. The questions in the research survey also appear formulated to probe for confirmation of this fact. In the section of post-research recommendations this attitude crystalizes into the conclusion that EGP (English for general purposes) should precede ESP. No less unexpected are the recommendations that more classes should be allotted to General English and the subject should be made obligatory. If the needs analysis is to inform syllabus design, however, a more open-minded approach should be adopted.

At the level of research and applied significance of the topic, we can say that the topic allows for extensive pursuits into the broad field of literature on the subject and the candidate shows evidence that she has read and understood several of the most important writings. Consequently, an attempt has been made to apply the knowledge to her teaching situation from the perspective of an expert and reflective practitioner. Therefore, her assessment for this parameter is positive.

### **Justifiability of the aims and objectives**

Bardha Gashi has formulated her aim: to study the students' needs for an ESP course, and she has mapped out objectives which can lead her to that goal. A range of instruments is developed to obtain the necessary data. Then the candidate develops a research methodology to get to her students' perceptions. Therefore, the research process is consistently applied, which is the best course of action for a doctoral student.

The candidate presents the current curriculum and the place of the ESP syllabi within it. In the final chapter we see improvements to both curriculum and syllabi, which means that the objective has been achieved – the needs analysis has prompted solutions for the problems identified at the outset. Therefore, the research instruments have yielded the necessary results and the University can now improve the tuition it offers to its students. With this conclusion, we can safely claim that the research justifies its purpose.



## Adequacy of the chosen methodology for achieving the goals

The methodology employed by the candidate includes three different instruments: a placement test, a questionnaire, and an achievement test. This implements the principle that needs analysis is conducted at three stages: before, during and after the course. The chapter dedicated to the research methodology reviews a battery of articles informing the selection and application of methods. However, as in the literature on ESP, the candidate does not specify which ones she has selected for her research. It transpires that Bardha Gashi is trying to gauge her students' opinions by asking them direct questions and taking the answers at face value. Only after the course the students are invited to take a test so that their performance can reveal whether they have learnt or needs of theirs have remained unsatisfied by the teaching. The suitability of such a device, however, depends on whether the test is achievement or proficiency and on the availability of data about the initial language level of the students. It also appears that very general skills are tested, such as tenses, article use etc., and only a limited number of specialised vocabulary. Since the test is not proficiency as the candidate rightly observes, it can only reveal which parts of the course have been mastered and not whether the language proficiency of the students has improved. Moreover, there is no benchmark for comparison, as the entry level is only measured by the students' self assessment, erroneously called 'placement test', rather than the traditional language test.

In effect, the candidate only relies on her students' professed opinion, without actually testing their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Despite the extensive – and largely unnecessary - review of research methods, and the expressed need for triangulation of the data, the dissertation demonstrates only responses to questionnaires, which can hardly reinforce or refute each other.

The representativeness of the sample is essential to validate the findings. For some reason, the candidate has recruited 100 participants in her study from different departments, taking different ESP courses. According to some of the authorities, Needs Analysis for an ESP course should be different for the three groups – inasmuch as it should cover a specific academic area in each case. Data concerning the conceptual area that needs to be covered, the most typical grammatical forms, salient writing patterns in the specialized language domain should be part of the study, in addition to the professed expectations of the learners. However, Gashi's research only focusses on her students' hopes and fears – as can be seen formulated with the questions. Paradoxically, some students are qualified as 'eligible' to take part in the study, while others are excluded – as it transpires later - because of their low proficiency in English. This immediately compromises the findings because the low achievers are excluded from the research design. In a needs-analysis survey for a course where the level of English is low, the mother tongue of the learners is a better option, rather than leaving the neediest participants outside the scope of the research. As for the representativeness, the criterion inclusion of all the course participants is more trustworthy than any magic numbers.

Overall, the methodology is a weak link in the research. However, the willingness to reach out to the students and keep a finger on their pulse is laudatory. With so much reading about research methodology – as demonstrated in the respective section - the candidate will certainly improve in future studies.



In the final analysis, the candidate is trying to get to her students' perception of what they need to learn and how they feel about her teaching. The research yields sufficient data to meet this requirement, despite the theoretical queries.

### Publishing record

Gashi has presented five publications. One is included in the proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Social Studies in Vienna in 2017, and it has been cited in one publication, according to data from *Research Gate*. All the articles have been published in conference proceedings, which is good because of the direct feedback and the opportunity to compare with other researchers. She also operates regionally – Macedonia, Turkey, Italy, which reveals an understanding of the need for local solutions. Her publication on project learning is part of a meeting of the IATEFL Special Interest Group for ESP, which means that she has learnt to benefit from participating in professional associations.

Gashi's profile in *Research Gate* gives her the index 1.0, which is a promising result for a doctoral student who has just started her research career. She is part of a network for teaching ESP in the region, which guarantees further research and professional development.

### Assessment

Based on the following facts:

- the research presents an academically sound approach to course design,
- the topic under investigation is of immense significance for the candidate's career,
- a huge amount of literature has been explored in preparation for the research presented with the PhD thesis,
- the text complies with the requirements of the genre
- the objective of being a reflective professional has been fully accomplished

I recommend the work for a good grade and the candidate - to be awarded the doctoral degree.

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