

## REVIEW

by

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Professional Field 2.1. Philology

on a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”

in Professional Field 2.1. Philology,

PhD Programme “General and Comparative Linguistics”,

Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures,

New Bulgarian University

with candidate **Fjolla Kallaba**,

independent PhD candidate

on the topic:

**“Kosovo Students’ Academic Writing Skills in English – Challenges and Solutions”**

Scientific supervisor: **Prof. Irena Vassileva, Dr. phil.habil.**

This review has been prepared in my capacity as a member of the academic jury appointed by **Order No. Z-RK-155/01.04.2026** of the Rector of New Bulgarian University.

### **1. Significance of the Research Problem**

The dissertation submitted for review, entitled “Kosovo Students’ Academic Writing Skills in English – Challenges and Solutions”, is devoted to a topical and significant problem in the field of applied linguistics, foreign language teaching, and academic writing—namely, the difficulties that students in Kosovo encounter when producing academic texts in English.

The topic is unquestionably relevant in the context of contemporary higher education, where English increasingly functions as the primary language of academic communication. For students for whom English is a foreign language, mastering academic writing is not only a linguistic, but also an educational, cognitive, and professional necessity. The ability to formulate a thesis, construct argumentation, work with sources, use appropriate academic vocabulary, and adhere to genre and linguistic conventions is essential for successful participation in the academic community.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on Kosovo, a context that is often overlooked in international research concerning academic writing in English as a foreign language. By addressing this gap, the dissertation contributes valuable insights to the field. Rather than merely outlining the general challenges associated with academic writing, it delves into specific issues through the analysis of empirical data, including student essays and questionnaires from both students and lecturers.

The topic also has a clearly defined applied value. The results of the study can be used in the development and improvement of courses in Academic English, English for Academic Purposes, academic writing seminars, and other university disciplines in which writing in

English is a core component. The practical orientation of the dissertation is one of its essential merits.

## **2. General Characteristics of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is structured logically and coherently. It includes an introduction, a theoretical review, a methodology chapter, presentation and discussion of results, a conclusion and recommendations, a section on limitations of the study, a bibliography, and appendices. This structure corresponds to established standards for doctoral research and allows for a clear tracing of the progression from theoretical framework to empirical analysis and the formulation of conclusions.

The object of the study is academic writing in English by students for whom English is a foreign language. The subject of the study is the difficulties encountered in the production of academic essays, as well as the strategies that students and lecturers associate with overcoming these difficulties. In this sense, the dissertation has a clearly defined focus: it does not examine academic writing in general, but specifically essay writing in an English-medium university context.

The research questions are clearly formulated and cover several interrelated aspects: what difficulties students in Kosovo encounter when writing essays in English; what types of errors are observed in their texts; what techniques students use in the writing process; what problems lecturers encounter when teaching writing; and which strategies lecturers consider most appropriate for improving students' writing competence.

The theoretical part of the dissertation examines key concepts and research directions related to academic writing, the essay as an academic genre, problematic areas in second-language writing, error analysis, error classification, grammatical errors, approaches to teaching writing, and the role of artificial intelligence in the process of text production. A notable strength of the study is the attempt to situate academic writing within a broader framework—not merely as a linguistic technique, but as a complex activity involving planning, structuring, argumentation, revision, editing, and adherence to academic conventions.

A particularly important place in the theoretical framework is occupied by error analysis. This choice is methodologically justified, as it allows the challenges faced by students to be described not only intuitively or through questionnaires, but on the basis of actually observed linguistic data. In the dissertation, errors are treated as indicators of the intermediate state of students' foreign-language competence and as a basis for formulating pedagogical recommendations.

## **3. Evaluation of the Methodology and the Empirical Study**

The methodology of the dissertation is appropriate to the stated aims and research questions. The study is organized in two main stages. The first stage consists of a qualitative analysis of 50 argumentative essays, each between 1,000 and 1,500 words, written by students enrolled in English language and academic writing courses. The second stage includes a questionnaire survey conducted among 400 students and 40 lecturers.

The combination of analysis of authentic student texts with questionnaire data is a key advantage of the study. It allows for comparison between actually observed errors, students' perceptions of their own difficulties, and lecturers' observations of the same problems. In this

way, the dissertation avoids one-sidedness and provides a more balanced account of the research problem.

The empirical part represents the most substantial component of the dissertation. The analysis of student essays reveals the multifaceted nature of academic writing challenges. They include grammatical errors, problems in sentence structure, punctuation inaccuracies, errors in the use of prepositions and articles, as well as problems in text organization. Particularly noteworthy is the finding that punctuation errors emerge as a significant problem, while students do not always recognize them as a major deficit. This discrepancy between observed errors and students' self-assessment is an important result, as it reveals the need for more systematic feedback and the development of metalinguistic awareness.

It should also be positively noted that the candidate does not reduce academic writing solely to grammatical correctness. The study also considers issues related to essay organization, logical sequencing, development of argumentation, use of transitions, and the achievement of cohesion and coherence. This is essential, as academic writing requires not only correct sentences, but the construction of a meaningful, logically structured, and genre-appropriate text.

The questionnaire survey among students complements the analysis by identifying problematic areas such as idea generation, text planning, source integration, essay structure, thesis formulation, use of academic vocabulary, and revision of the final text. In this way, the conclusion is confirmed that academic writing is a complex competence in which linguistic, cognitive, rhetorical, and learning skills are intertwined.

A strong aspect of the empirical design is the inclusion of the lecturers' perspective. Lecturers identify lack of critical thinking, difficulties in constructing clear and coherent argumentation, limited academic vocabulary, insufficiently developed academic reading skills, and difficulties in working with sources as major problems. These observations extend the analysis beyond the level of linguistic form and indicate that students' difficulties are connected with broader academic practices.

Overall, the empirical material is sufficiently varied and appropriately selected for the purposes of the study. The use of 50 essays, 400 student questionnaires, and 40 lecturer questionnaires provides a solid basis for well-founded conclusions within the studied context. The candidate demonstrates the ability to collect, systematize, and interpret empirical data, as well as to derive pedagogically relevant conclusions.

#### **4. Evaluation of the Scientific and Applied Contributions**

The dissertation under review has several clearly identifiable contributions. First, it systematizes the problematic areas encountered in academic writing in English by students in Kosovo. This is an important contribution, as the issue has not been sufficiently explored in this specific educational and sociolinguistic context.

Second, the study offers an empirically grounded classification and analysis of errors in student essays. Through the analysis of authentic written work, the candidate establishes which types of errors are most frequently encountered and which aspects of writing require the greatest pedagogical attention. This contribution has both descriptive and applied value.

Third, the dissertation compares three perspectives: the actual written products of the students, the students' self-assessment, and the lecturers' observations. This triangulation of data is a significant advantage, as it allows for the identification of both objectively observable patterns and discrepancies between perception and actual writing practice.

Fourth, the study formulates practically applicable recommendations for improving the teaching of academic writing. Among these are the need for more systematic practice, targeted feedback, work on essay structure, exercises in source integration, development of critical thinking, training in revision and editing, as well as more conscious use of digital and AI tools.

The applied value of the study lies precisely in its potential to be used by lecturers, university programmes, writing centres, and institutions developing courses in English for Academic Purposes. The dissertation has the potential to serve as a basis for the development of more effective teaching materials and strategies for supporting students.

## **5. Evaluation of the Candidate's Academic Profile, CV, and Publications**

The candidate's professional profile is directly related to the topic of the dissertation. The academic and professional biography of Fjolla Kallaba demonstrates a consistent orientation toward the English language, translation, and teaching. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature and a Master's degree in Professional Translation and Interpretation from Hasan Prishtina University. This educational background is relevant to the topic of the dissertation and provides a solid foundation for research in the fields of English language, applied linguistics, and academic communication.

The candidate also has substantial teaching experience in the field of English language education. She has taught writing seminars, Introduction to Academic English, Public Speaking, and Technical Communication at RIT Kosovo College. She has also taught courses in English for Academic Purposes, preparatory programmes for prospective university students, Business English, and TOEFL/IELTS preparation. This experience is particularly important, as it supports the conclusion that the research problem was not chosen incidentally or purely theoretically, but arises from actual teaching practice.

Her experience in courses related to academic English and writing is particularly pertinent. It is precisely in such courses that the problems analyzed in the dissertation become evident: difficulties in structuring texts, formulating a thesis, developing argumentation, using academic vocabulary, revising texts, and adhering to genre conventions. For this reason, it may be assumed that the candidate is familiar with the research problem not only as a theoretical object, but also as part of everyday pedagogical practice.

The candidate's publication activity is also thematically related to the dissertation. The submitted CV lists publications dealing with grammatical error analysis in academic essays written by university students in Kosovo, as well as lecturers' perspectives on problems and strategies for improving academic writing. These publications are directly aligned with the two main empirical stages of the dissertation—the analysis of student written work and the questionnaire survey among lecturers.

The article on grammatical error analysis in academic essays is significant, as it reflects the first stage of the dissertation research. It also demonstrates the candidate's ability to apply the methodology of error analysis to an authentic corpus of student texts and to derive systematic

observations. The article devoted to lecturers' perspectives corresponds to the second stage of the study and illustrates the candidate's interest in pedagogical strategies for improving academic writing.

The candidate's participation in academic forums should also be noted, including conferences in Vienna and Sofia, where topics related to academic writing and difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions from English into Albanian have been presented. This participation further complements the candidate's academic profile and serves as evidence of her activity in the fields of applied linguistics, foreign language teaching, and interlingual communication.

In summary, the CV and publications of Fjolla Kallaba support the positive evaluation of the dissertation. They demonstrate consistency between education, teaching practice, research interests, and scholarly output. The candidate presents the profile of an early-career researcher and lecturer whose work is oriented toward real problems of academic writing in a foreign-language context.

## **6. Evaluation of the Abstract**

The abstract accurately presents the main content of the dissertation. It reflects the topic, aims, research questions, methodology, main results, and conclusions of the study. The structure of the abstract follows the logic of the dissertation and provides a sufficiently clear idea of its scope and contributions.

It is worth noting that the abstract presents both the theoretical framework and the empirical part of the research. It includes the main data concerning the two-stage design of the study, namely the analysis of 50 student essays, the survey among 400 students, and the survey among 40 lecturers. This allows the reader to orient themselves in the scale and nature of the conducted research.

The abstract fulfils its function of presenting the content of the dissertation in a synthesized form. It accurately reflects the main results and does not create discrepancies between the stated contributions and what is actually presented in the dissertation.

## **7. Comments and Recommendations**

Alongside the positive aspects outlined above, several comments and recommendations may be made. In some places, the analysis remains rather descriptive and does not always reach a more in-depth interpretation of the observed phenomena. This concerns primarily the relationship between the different types of errors and the broader reasons for their occurrence.

Some of the comments made at the preliminary defence have been taken into account in the final version of the dissertation. The two stages of the research—the analysis of student essays and the questionnaire survey among students and lecturers—are more clearly distinguished. A separate analysis of essay organization has also been included, which to some extent expands the initially dominant focus on grammatical and mechanical errors. In addition, limitations of the study have been formulated in the final version, which indicates a more precise awareness of the scope and limits of the conclusions.

Nevertheless, at the conceptual level, a certain ambiguity remains between the stated object of the research—the academic essay as a genre—and the indicators actually analyzed, which are to a considerable extent oriented toward grammatical and linguistic characteristics. In this

sense, the focus of the analysis shifts toward general language competence, which partially limits the generalizations concerning academic writing as a specific discursive practice.

Second, in the theoretical part, there are sections that could be shortened or more clearly linked to the subsequent empirical analysis. Some subsections are of a more general overview nature and would benefit from a clearer articulation of the relationship between the theoretical positions discussed and the specific analytical categories used in the empirical study.

Third, although the sample of 400 students and 40 lecturers is substantial for a doctoral study, the corpus of 50 student essays could be expanded in future research. A larger corpus would allow for more detailed comparisons between different groups of students, levels of English proficiency, types of universities, or types of courses.

A future development of the study could include qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or observation of the writing process. This would allow for a deeper understanding of how students plan, write, revise, and use feedback. Such an approach would complement the present study, which successfully combines the analysis of written products and questionnaire data.

These comments do not diminish the value of the dissertation. Rather, they outline possibilities for further development of the research and for continued work in the field of academic writing in English as a foreign language.

## **8. Conclusion**

The dissertation by Fjolla Kallaba represents a topical, independent, and practically significant study in the field of applied linguistics and foreign-language academic writing. It addresses an important problem that is directly related to the quality of higher education and to students' preparation for participation in English-medium academic environments.

The study demonstrates good orientation within the research field and an appropriately designed research framework. The results presented are convincing and have a clear practical orientation.

In view of the relevance of the topic, the adequacy of the methodology, the scope and nature of the empirical material, the results achieved, as well as the candidate's professional profile and publication activity, I give a positive evaluation of the dissertation.

I consider that the dissertation meets the requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", and I propose that the esteemed academic jury award Fjolla Kallaba the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in Professional Field 2.1. Philology.

**Date: 04.05.2026**

**Reviewer:**

**/Assoc. Prof. Ivaylo Yordanov Dagnev, PhD/**