OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Elena Savova, PhD,

New Bulgarian University,

1.3. Pedagogy of Foreign Language Teaching (German Language)

for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy"

in professional field: 1.3. Pedagogy of …

scientific specialty: Methodology of Modern Language Teaching

with candidate Lilyana Lulcheva Todorova-Ruskova,

PhD thesis entitled "E-portfolio-based Formative Assessment Model in an

English for Specific Purposes Context"

The submitted PhD thesis contains 263 pages of main text, as well as a bibliography comprising 327 sources, and 5 appendices. It consists of an introduction, three chapters and a final part in which findings, recommendations and conclusions have been provided. In terms of form and content, it fully meets the requirements for a PhD thesis for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy". The dissertation is logically well structured and presented in a very good scientific style.

1.   Scientific and applied significance of the research

The PhD thesis topic is characterised by topicality and significance, which have emerged in the last few years under the impact of the dynamically developing social, material and technical, scientific, educational and, last but not least, living conditions. Its choice has been justified by the author with the current requirements and opportunities for teaching and assessment in the context of constructivism, with the qualitative changes in the teaching methods and techniques influenced by the information and communication technologies, with the individual and socio-economic significance of the specialized English language education for economic majors, as well as the need to flexibly adapt the teaching and learning processes to changing and emergency conditions, such as the pandemic situation in 2020 and 2021. Accordingly, the PhD thesis is intended to contribute to the development of scientific knowledge and practical experience in formative assessment, which can be applied with the aid of electronic platforms and tools in diverse and blended learning settings – synchronous and asynchronous, distance, hybrid and face-to-face, and which meets the current requirements for

shaping digitally competent, autonomous and reflective learners, able to learn and self-educate throughout their lives. In this context, the need for Bulgarian scientific and applied studies regarding the electronic portfolio use for formative assessment has been determined (page 7).

2.   Display of clearly stated research aims and objectives

In view of the scientific and practical necessity of such research, the PhD thesis aims have been laid down: constructing a model for formative assessment through an electronic portfolio in the teaching of English for special purposes to students of economics and testing it in a real-world context. The expected outcomes are related to increase in academic success rates, learners' "engagement", "motivation" and "autonomy" (p. 9). Precisely described, logically and hierarchically arranged tasks have been set for attaining the aims (pp. 10-11).

3.   Compliance of the research methodology and research methods with the set aims and objectives

With regards to the aims and objectives set, the PhD student correctly defines the research subject and object and formulates two hypotheses. The first hypothesis, related to increasing the academic success rates, is provable with the chosen methods and tools. The second one contains categories such as "motivation", "engagement" and "autonomy", which are subject to a particularly detailed examination (there is such only in relation to motivation in the PhD thesis), and on this basis – deriving specific indicators and reflecting them more directly (not only indirectly, as in the research) – in surveys and interviews, as well as in other, more complex measuring tools.

Regardless of this note, it can be summarized that in terms of aims and objectives, as well as the research object and subject, completely appropriate methods corresponding to the pedagogical research requirements have been selected and successfully implemented. The theoretical analysis indicates the author's excellent knowledge in the field of communicative competence, methodology of general and specialized foreign language teaching, theories of autonomous learning and metacognitive competence, implementation of information and communication technologies in education, types of assessment (including self-assessment and peer assessment) and the related electronic means. Current and significant documents, concepts and scientific publications have been considered, taking account of the Bulgarian contribution to each of the mentioned aspects. The analysis, although in certain parts a little more detailed than necessary, has been conducted very purposefully and convincingly justifies the choice of

means and methods for constructing an e-portfolio-based formative assessment model.

The formative assessment model has been presented very precisely and convincingly in the second chapter. It is multi-component, involving different aspects of learners' communication skills and different data collection and evaluation procedures. It is clearly laid out and easy for learners to use. Its direction towards the specialized English language curriculum in a specific context bears witness to its construct, content and ecological validity. The objective evaluation of the model using a matrix ("rubric") for evaluating e-learning in higher education also makes a very good impression (p. 185). The methodological and technological aspects of the model development and implementation have been considered, and the related advantages and limitations have been taken into account.

The design and action plan for testing the e-portfolio-based assessment model are developed and presented very clearly in line with the requirements for pedagogical research (pp. 156, 179). The stages of preparation, implementation and evaluation follow the necessary logical order. The complexity of the task lies in the qualitative and procedural dimensions of the model. In view of these factors, the questions in the surveys and the author's tools ("rubrics") for assessment and self-assessment have been tailored. The model has been tested with the necessary groups – control and experimental – within a sufficient period of time – two semesters. Data from pre- and post-experiment achievement tests, midterm and summative self-assessment, and pre- and post-experiment surveys and interviews have been analyzed using appropriate statistical methods. Their presentation proves a convincing increase in the success rates of the experimental group, which started the instruction with a lower level of communicative competence compared to the control group, but in the process of instruction, assessment and self-assessment managed to catch up with it. The surveys and interviews (especially the qualitative data) show a certain presence of reflection (ability to self-observe, to conduct a self-analysis against objective standards and in relation to other learners; setting and pursuing learning goals), as well as satisfaction and a positive attitude towards the tested model. Thus, hypothesis 1 has been proved convincingly. Some data have also been presented that confirm hypothesis 2. Based on the obtained results, valuable recommendations for the applicability of the model in practice have been given.

4.   PhD thesis contributions of scientific and scientific-applied nature

As a result of the theoretical and applied research conducted in the course of the dissertation, the following main contributions are noticeable:

1. The theoretical knowledge in the field of assessment in foreign language teaching with the aid of electronic tools has been systematized and enriched. This aspect of the PhD thesis has a high informative value and would be interesting and useful for educators and experts in the area of general and specialized foreign language teaching.

2. A model for formative assessment, based on an electronic portfolio and directed towards developing learners' communicative and metacognitive skills, has been developed and successfully tested.

3. In support of the model, innovative teaching materials and assessment tools that can be used in a similar context have been created and tested.

4. New methods and techniques meeting current needs and enhancing the effectiveness of foreign language teaching in a specific educational institution are available, which are also applicable in other contexts.

5.   Evaluation of the publications on the PhD thesis: number, type of journals in which they have been published

Three articles related to the topic of the PhD thesis have been listed. They enhance and set out different aspects of the research: the role of learners' digital skills in foreign language acquisition in distance learning settings, the e-portfolio as an assessment tool, student perceptions of e-portfolio-based formative assessment. The texts were published in the Yearbook of the Department of "Foreign Languages and Cultures" – NBU, in an electronic journal with international participation and in the UNWE Jubilee conference proceedings. The PhD student has also listed two workbooks for specialized English language teaching at UNWE, attesting to the author's contributions of applied nature in this field.

6. References and citations by other authors; published scientific reviews, etc.

The presented documentation does not reveal any information about citations of the PhD student's publications. However, they have been presented at prestigious forums and have received a positive response.

7. Opinions, recommendations and notes

The only note regarding the content of the research – related to the second hypothesis – has been presented in point 3. However, it should not affect the general impression of the high scientific and applied value of the PhD thesis.

It is recommended that the formative assessment e-portfolio be presented in more detail in future publications, examining and illustrating with examples its components and related student artefacts, with the aim of promoting and possibly disseminating the model and the associated good teaching practices beyond the specific testing context.

8. Conclusion

The presented study demonstrates the author's high theoretical scholarship and her excellent skills in conducting pedagogical research in action with significant scientific and applied results. I give a positive assessment of the presented PhD thesis "E-portfolio-based Formative Assessment Model in an English for Specific Purposes Context" and I support awarding Lilyana Todorova-Ruskova with the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy" in professional field 1. 3. Pedagogy of..., scientific specialty "Methodology of Modern Language Teaching".

10.04.2023   Assoc Prof. Elena Savova
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