

REVIEW

by prof. Dr. Romyana Balinova Todorova,
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academic field 2.1. Philology

for awarding the educational and academic degree of “doctor of philosophy”,
New Bulgarian University,
in the field of higher education Humanities,
academic field 2.1. Philology,
doctor’s programme *General and Comparative Linguistics*

Topic of PhD thesis: *Kosovo students’ academic writing skills in English –
challenges and solutions*

Candidate: Fjolla Kallaba

Reason for presenting the Review: member of the academic jury for the defense of
a PhD thesis in compliance of the NBU’s Rector’s Order No 3-PK-155/01.04.2026

1. Data analyzed in relation to the compliance of the application with the minimum and additional requirements for awarding the educational and academic degree of “doctor of philosophy”

The candidate in the procedure, Fjolla Kallaba, has submitted all documents required for awarding the educational and academic degree of “doctor of philosophy” certifying the compliance of her application with the requirements of the Law about Scientific Degrees and Titles, as well as the Rules of Procedures of the New Bulgarian University. The submitted documents confirm the correctness of the aggregated indicators of the scientific data for her research, which correspond to the minimum national requirements under bl. 2b, para 2 and 3 of the ODARB, as well as to the additional requirements of the NBU.

2. General characteristics of the PhD thesis

The PhD thesis consists of 156 pages in 7 chapters as follows: 1. Introduction; 2. Literature Review; 3. Methodology; 4. Findings and Discussion; 5. Conclusion and Suggestions; 6. Limitations of the

Study; and 7. References. It also contains 4 appendices (pp. 134-156) as well as 34 graphs and diagrams which illustrate the process of the analysis.

In Chapter 1. Introduction (pp. 1-4) special attention is paid to the motivation, aims and objectives as well as to the topicality of the research with an emphasis on the situation in Kosovo, related to students' skills for academic essay writing, which is a good start for the presentation of the PhD thesis. The introductory chapter has the structure established for such a text. Metacognitive processes and skills are mentioned and discussed. Various definitions of 'essay' are provided. Components of essays and types of essays are presented and defined as well as opinions on different obstacles in essay writing, namely linguistic, cognitive and psychological, and strategies for overcoming them, peer view being one of them, are stated. A rather serious part of the process entails error analysis. Types of errors are considered crucial for the acquisition of good writing skills. Mother tongue interference is of paramount importance for making errors, interlingual and intralingual. Approaches to teaching writing such as product, process and genre are not disregarded either. An essential point to make is the focus on the interrelation between AI, AI technologies and essay writing. AI and Chat GPT help learners gain some self-confidence and provide immediate feedback as for their mistakes. They also facilitate the arrangement of their reference lists. The much-debated issue of plagiarism is also the focus of attention. Tools such as Grammarly and QuillBot for improving students' writing skills and avoiding plagiarism are pointed out as well. Some drawbacks and dependency of using AI to a great extent are mentioned as it can hinder critical thinking, hence teacher guidance is of importance. The research questions posed in the PhD thesis are also outlined.

In Chapter 2. Literature Review (pp. 5-27) the latest theories related to the problems of writing an academic essay are stated, which is a good starting point. The review of the theoretical sources is carried out and structured in such a way so that it can prepare the text receiver of the dissertation for the application of the theoretical prerequisites in the analysis proper. A rich illustrative material is quoted. The logic of the theoretical review is clear and consistent.

Chapter 3. Methodology (pp. 28-32) discusses the methodology used in the research. It incorporates qualitative as well as quantitative methods related to grammar and essay organization as well as error analysis issues of students from different universities in Kosovo for the academic year 2022/23. The types of errors under study are grammatical, structural and mechanical. The questionnaires in Appendices A and B were given to 400 students and to 40 professors to fill in.

Chapter 4 covers the findings and results from the study. The first of the error questions was focused on punctuation, followed by the use of prepositions and articles, quite correctly as these issues have always been a problem for learners (and not only) as there is a difference between punctuation rules and preposition and article use in English and in Albanian. The study is also illustrated by concrete examples from the students' essays, supported by commentaries and corrections.

Chapter 5. Conclusion and Suggestions summarizes the information from the whole thesis.

Chapter 6. Limitations of the study provides certain drawbacks because of the limited number of students; the various reasons being mentioned. One of them was students' disagreement as for discussing their works. Suggestions about future improvements are presented, one of which being clearly outlined and attainable aims for each activity connected to essay writing as well as its relation to real problems and projects.

Chapter 7. References (pp. 124-133) is quite exhaustive and contains references after year 2000, which are of a more general nature as well as most of them related to the issues of essay writing in Kosovo.

3. Significance of the research issue from an academic and practical perspective

The PhD thesis is oriented towards a very topical field of issues related to the academic writing skills in English by students from different universities in Kosovo and to the search of their overcoming them. The topic is quite suitable for a dissertation as it allows for a deeper analysis of these processes not only from a linguistic, cognitive and cultural perspective, but also depending

on explicit and implicit factors. The 21st challenges are brought to the fore, namely the appearance of AI and its use in students' papers as regards their structures, grammar and error analysis. Special emphasis is paid to plagiarism as well as ethical issues.

The focus of attention in the thesis is comparing and contrasting the same structures and usages in both languages: English and Albanian. S-V agreement, parallel structures, gerunds and infinitives and other grammatical phenomena are the focus of attention in the thesis.

Besides, the students' answers to each question are analyzed. Students reflect on their performances. Self-evaluation is provided presented in the form of diagrams and charts. Apart from linguistic issues, stylistic ones are also debated.

Preference is given to online databases usage during the process of essay writing.

Students are sincere enough as to point out the concerns and worries they come across during the process of writing. Lack of motivation and feedback anxiety as external factors are among the problems expressed by the students. There are interesting finds from the questionnaires' answers. The lecturers' survey analysis views the process of essay writing from a different perspective. One of their concerns is the issue of plagiarism and in this respect, paraphrasing and rephrasing of information as well as integrating source material in the essays comes to the fore.

4. Degree of acquaintance of the research issue as regards the references used

The PhD student is very well acquainted with the discussed issue outlined in the aims and objectives of the thesis, which are formulated quite precisely. The citations are correct and in accordance with the settings of the study.

There is a well-grounded theoretical model of the investigation.

The chosen methodology and methods of research correspond to the aims and activities of the PhD thesis.

The gathering and analyzing of the empirical data in the doctor's thesis should be acknowledged as the candidate's personal contribution.

The presented commentaries are connected with the results from the assessment. Randomly selected examples with evaluations are provided to support the statements on the different parts of the essays. The evaluations are too detailed and they can serve as examples related to the ways feedback should be carried out but in practice it is too time consuming and cannot possibly be processed in this particular manner, and, frankly speaking, I doubt it if there will be any teacher who will do such a revision in this consistent and detailed way.

Brown's Analytic Scoring approach for assessing the organization of students' essays is presented in a table, which is good as it orients readers and students easily in the picture.

Possible future studies related to the same or other similar issues are well outlined. Academic perspectives ensuing from the PhD thesis achievements are also presented.

5. Assessment of the publications related to the PhD thesis: number, quality of the editions they are published in

The PhD student has got 3 publications in prestigious editions, 2 of which in Kosovo at university and national level and 1 in Sofia University Annual. Apart from that she has participated in 2 international conferences – in Vienna and in Sofia. The topics of her publications and of one of her presentations are related to the research issues in the candidate's PhD thesis.

6. Critical notes and recommendations

Various concrete activities should have been provided for overcoming barriers and improving students' skills rather than just suggestions in this respect, although there is a very detailed feedback on students' essays and their mistakes and errors.

Chapter 2. Literature Review has enumerated subchapters in the Contents, which is as a result of my remark in the candidate's previous version, but these numberings are missing in the main body. In the Contents there are numbers in front of the chapters and subchapters but in the main body they are missing, e.g. Stage Two – Survey Analysis (p. 31) in Chapter 4. Methodology; the dash should have been replaced by colon after Stage Two.

In the PhD thesis the References contain a lot of present-day titles, but I find the lack of any references of Dr. Vassileva's as a drawback as a number of her publications are on the same topic, i.e., academic writing. The Reference section should not be numbered as it is supplementary. There are some technical mistakes in the dissertation as well as in the Extended Abstract.

7. Extended Abstract Evaluation

The Extended Abstract meets the requirements for such a type of text as it presents precisely and clearly and in a concise way the contents of the PhD thesis and describes the results from the research as is pointed out; however the contributions of the dissertation are not explicitly outlined.

Conclusion

Taking into account the author's knowledgeability in the respected academic field as well as her skills for conducting an academic research as well as her good language skills and on the basis of what has been mentioned so far, in spite of the critical remarks and recommendations, I strongly support the candidacy in this procedure and give my positive assessment about her scientific and applied achievements, as her academic and professional orientation in the field of philological sciences fulfils the requirements of the *Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria* and its accompanying regulations. I recommend to the Academic Selection Committee to vote positively for awarding **the educational and academic degree of "doctor of philosophy" to Fjolla Kallaba in the area of higher education: 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology, General and Comparative Linguistics at the New Bulgarian University.**

May 7th, 2026

Signature:

(prof. Romyana Todorova, PhD)