

OPINION

by prof. Dr. Alexandra Bozhidarova Bagasheva, Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", professor in 2.1. Philology (General Linguistics - Cognitive Linguistics and Word Formation - (English)) for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field: 1.3. "Pedagogy of tr..."; scientific specialty: "Methodology of teaching modern languages", with candidate Vanya Lubomirova Katsarska - doctoral student with individual curriculum in the doctoral program "Methodology of modern language teaching", who has submitted a dissertation, titled: *Designing a Communicative Competence-focused Syllabus for an Aeronautical English Module for Military Pilots and Air Traffic Controllers*.

Although the pragmatic motivation of Vanya Lubomirova Katsarska's research culminating the submitted dissertation is dictated by the requirements for interoperability, by the new aviation regulations and conventions in the globalized world of the 21st century, which require the adoption of conceptually new study plans and curricula at VVVU "Georgi Benkovski" and - specifically a new aviation English curriculum in line with modern aviation language settings, the dissertation goes far beyond the direct practical goal, which is achieved in full and boasts an extremely high quality.

The dissertation is written in English and is 238 pages long. It consists of 4 chapters - Introduction, Theoretical foundations of the study, Empirical research and results, Conclusion, followed by a set of self-assessed theoretical and applied contributions. Attached is a reference list of 160 titles, the ICAO descriptors for English language proficiency, 4 surveys, a sample list of free-response survey questions, and 4 syllabi. The theoretical foundations of the research are focused on three main aspects: aviation English and aeronautical English, with a specific focus on military aviation; the specificity of competences in the context of aviation; and more generally, the characteristics and models for curriculum design.

The problems related to the formation of professional communicative competences of military pilots and air traffic controllers in military schools are insufficiently studied worldwide and have definitely not been the subject of dedicated research, in a theoretical or practical aspect, in Bulgaria, which is what makes the dissertation highly topical and with a wide margin for genuine contributions (of both theoretical and practical nature). In its entirety, the dissertation presents a well-designed empirical and critical study of the relationship between the acquisition of English for specific (military) aviation purposes and the culture (national, organizational and individual) of other countries, as well as the relationship of aviation English with a range of competences: communicative, professional, interactive, intercultural; with measurable cultural parameters within cultural differences as worked out by Hofstede (2010), such as: power distance, the individualism-collectivism dimension, uncertainty avoidance, contentment vs. restraint, masculinity vs. femininity, and the various dimensions of professional and organizational culture within which aeronautical (military) communication takes place. Along with these significant contextual factors, the dissertation examines the specifics of aviation English - disambiguation, fixed collocations, simplified syntax, linguistic formulas and specific grammatical constructions.

Based on the extensive review of all the features of English language for aviation (military) purposes, Vanya Katsarska offers a fully developed curriculum, syllabus and study program of "Aviation English for military pilot and flight controller cadets", i.e., AERONAUTICAL ENGLISH for the purposes of the Bulgarian Air Force Academy, with the program presented in the context of similar national programs in Argentina, Estonia and Ukraine, provided to the reader in appendices to the dissertation.

Among the classifications of different types of programs (structural, situational, thematic, functional, conceptual (or conceptual-functional), activity-oriented, content-based, skill development-oriented, and negotiated), the doctoral student chooses content-based ones as the most suitable and effective that easily fit within competency-based learning with a focus on the outcome rather than the learning process.

The dissertation applies an exploratory-sequential design of the empirical research, which has led to the preparation of a detailed and worked-out ESP program. In connection with the specific course and curriculum in aeronautical English, a detailed analysis of the profile of the cadets specializing in "Military Pilot" and "Flight Controller" has been prepared. Specialized English training cannot be completely separated from the general language training of the cadets and must be seen as a continuum that begins with a course in General English, passes through General Military English and ends with a specialized course in Aeronautical English (as Vanya Katsarska offers as the final, applied product of her dissertation).

In order to develop the specialized course and the curriculum (with all its attributes – goals, expected results, the targeted competences, language knowledge and skills, lexical fields, grammatical structures, distribution in a logical sequence, evaluation method, etc.), the PhD student conducts an empirical study to determine the type of optimal program. Based on the work of an international focus group of professionals in the field of foreign language training, she developed a list of competencies that best meet the foreign language communicative needs of pilots and air traffic controllers and can therefore be included in a specialized aviation English curriculum. As the second stage of the preliminary empirical studies, Vanja Katsarska conducted a field study (observation of typical working days at the airports in the city of Dolna Mitropolia and the village of Grivitsa) in order to define and summarize the professional activities and tasks related to communication skills that military pilots and air traffic controllers perform in their professional practice. This leads the doctoral student to the identification of the immediate language needs of the cadets from VVVU. Her next step is to identify the types of learning tasks that integrate authentic professional engagements into the aviation English curriculum for military pilots and air traffic controllers. As a result, she offers the following tasks: aviation role-playing (with complications), armchair flight, routine flight simulation, non-routine flight simulation, picture story, stand-up, weather report, pre-flight briefing, debriefing, mission planning, discussion, authentic case scenarios and others.

Vanja Katsarska uses the qualitative results of these preliminary studies to create tools to be tested quantitatively in the next stage of the exploratory-sequentially pre-arranged mixed methods research. She achieves this by developing three context-specific surveys on topics, verbal acts, competences, language skills and other essential components related to the development of an aviation English curriculum (in the form of open-ended questions or statements to be graded in the form of Likert scales). The respondents are 53 aviation English

teachers from 24 countries, 106 officers from the Bulgarian Air Force and 24 cadets from the Bulgarian Air Force Academy. According to the (correlation) analyses of the survey results, linguistic competence is closely correlated with interactive competence, with professional competence and to a lesser extent with intercultural competence.

As a result of the critical analysis of the conducted surveys, the conclusion is reached that the groups for learning aeronautical English must be homogeneous in terms of the students' specialties, there should be no more than 12 people in a group, and the minimum entry level of general English should be B1 according to the European Language Framework. The summaries of findings from the qualitative and quantitative stages of the empirical research and the literature review lead the PhD student Katsarska to develop two models: Aeronautical English Curriculum Design and 10 Principles Underpinning Aeronautical English Curriculum Design in general. The curriculum clearly and precisely sets out the principles, goals and tasks of the language training, the selection of the content is context- and task-tailored to the needs of the learners and up-to-date, and the expected results are logically and systematically presented. Ways to check learning outcomes are also suggested.

The goals and tasks of the dissertation are clearly stated and the motivation for every step of the research is clearly explicated. The development of the language program and curriculum is runs in parallel with the seamless incorporation of determining factors stemming from the professional context to the language units with the greatest degree of utility for the learning objectives of the target group.

The most significant contributions of the dissertation are: the development of 10 principles as a foundation for the preparation of aviation English language programs; the development of a detailed curriculum aimed at increasing the communicative competences of the target learners, a hybrid approach that combines some of the characteristics of the competence-based approach and the hour-based approach; the identification of cross-cultural factors (military hierarchy, collectivism, gender equality, organizational constraints, freedom of action and thought, stereotypes, fear of loss of authority, etc.) that can affect the communication of between a military pilot and an air traffic controller. It is unequivocally proven that it is important for flight safety for intercultural competence to be integrated into the curriculum.

The text is written in excellent, professional English, following the requirements for constructing an academic text. The text is characterized by a high degree of readability, with a good structure and balanced content in parts. The presentation of the tools used in the preliminary stages of the empirical research makes the research even more convincing. The many illustrative and informative appendices only reinforce the excellent impression of the dissertation and the excellent curriculum.

The sources listed in the bibliography correspond to the subject area and cover the extensive scholarly contextualization of the research that led to the offering of the Aviation English for Pilot and Air Traffic Controller cadets curriculum.

In relation to the other regulated requirements for a successful defense, all the required documents and evidence for the scientific and teaching activities of the doctoral student are present.

The publications of the doctoral student are presented in the abstract. The publications themselves (six in number) were submitted to the jury, with two being book chapters and the

rest articles in periodicals or collections of conference papers. Three are published in international editions, four are in English. All articles are on the topic and meet the requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor". Also provided is information on citations of Vanya Katsarska's publications. The publications are on topic and present to the general public some of the topics directly addressed in the submitted dissertation.

Based on everything highlighted here, and given the fact that the overall scientific output of the dissertation student, as well as the submitted dissertation, exceed the minimum legal requirements, I give my categorically high, positive assessment of the work of Vanya Lubomirova Katsarska and invite the honorable jury to award Vanya Lubomirova Katsarska the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional direction: 1.3. "Pedagogy of ..."; scientific specialty: "Methodology of teaching modern languages".

Date: 17 March 2023

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