

REVIEW

by prof. dr. Snezhana Hristova Nikolova

regarding the dissertation on the topic "Optimizing English language education of students with mild mental retardation in primary school age" for the award of a PhD educational and scientific degree in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (*Special pedagogy*)

Doctoral student: Violeta Dimitrova Halacheva

Scientific adviser: Prof. Milen Zamfirov Zamfirov

Total presentation of the procedure and PhD student

By order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" № RD 38-360/08.07.2022 I am appointed a member of a scientific jury under the procedure for awarding the " PhD" by Violeta Dimitrova Halacheva, doctoral student of independent training in the professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special pedagogy). At the first meeting of the scientific jury, held on 18.07.2022, I was appointed a reviewer.

The dissertation was discussed at a meeting of the Department of Special Pedagogy and aimed at opening a protection procedure.

PhD student Halacheva has submitted all the documents of the electronic and paper medium necessary for the protection of her dissertation, in accordance with the requirements of the ZRASRB and the Rules for its implementation and according to the Rules on the Terms and Conditions for the acquisition of scientific degrees and the occupation of academic positions at Sofia University "" St. Kliment Ohridski ". Three publications have been attached.

Violeta Halacheva completed secondary education at 18 William Gladstone High School. Sofia with a humanitarian profile. She graduated in 2016 at NBU as a bachelor with acquired professional qualification "Philologist, teacher in German". In 2018 she graduated with a degree in English Philology from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski ", Master's Program Communication: Language, Literature, Media with Professional Qualification Philologist - Anglicist (profile " Literature and Media "). In 2022, she was deducted with the right to defense as a PhD student in self -preparation in the professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (special pedagogy) at the Department of Special Pedagogy, FESA.

She has an IT competence with very good skills to work with the tools of Microsoft Office, PowerPoint, Adobe and more. She speaks excellent German and English, demonstrates good command of Russian.

She has teamwork skills as well as excellent communication skills for working with children.

She has professional experience in the field of teaching a foreign language. Since 2020 she has been an assistant at the Department of Elementary School Pedagogy in FESA at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski. " She is the editor of the anniversary of the FESA.

Actuality of the theme

Violeta Halacheva's dissertation work is of modern sound and with an attitude towards pedagogical practice. Globally, communication cannot be optimal without proficiency in foreign languages (especially in English). In this context, the English language learning methodology sought more effective forms of learning for faster and more quality language acquisition. This can also largely be attributed to the absorption of a foreign language by students with mild mental retardation.

In the scientific literature in Bulgaria, mental retardation is often defined as a general underdevelopment of the psyche and a permanent violation of personal construction. There are serious differences between students with mental retardation and other groups of students with special educational needs regarding cognitive, emotional and willpower characteristics and abilities. This defines them as a peculiar category of students, with well -defined difficulties in succeeding both in education and in their overall functioning. It is a fact that in recent years the number of students with mental retardation has been significant. Their presence in general schools necessitates a review of conventional policies and optimization of educational instruments. Because, regardless of their deficits, students with mental retardation have potential opportunities for development and socialization. These opportunities can be realized using specific methods and means of work, in the conditions of supporting and inclusive environment.

The main intent of the development is to offer a specific technology for the implementation of the English language learning process in 4th grade-through more effective ways to form their communicative skills and through new models for transforming the learning material. In this context, I appreciate the problem presented as interesting and dissertable, with the necessary practical focus and with a request for real contributions to the selection of intriguing training strategies.

Characteristics of the dissertation and content evaluation

The dissertation in formal terms covers 180 computer pages, of which 160 pages are for the main text, including 31 figures and 57 screenshots. 12 pages of bibliography are attached with a total of 148 sources of Cyrillic and Latin, cited in the text. An application with sample methodological developments is included in grades 1-4th grades richly illustrated and detailed.

In meaningful and quantitative terms, the dissertation presented meets the requirements for a doctoral thesis.

Structurally, the development consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusion, bibliography and applications.

The introduction directs to the importance of the topic and the actuality of the problem of English language learning of students with a slight degree of mental retardation. The complexity in the formation of communicative competence for this category of students and the need to find an optimal approach in this process is also noted here. In this regard, the subject of the research is also determined, namely - optimizing the work of English text in the education of students with mild mental retardation.

The first two chapters in a logical sequence look at the two basic guidelines of the dissertation - training of students with mild mental retardation and working with text in foreign language education. An analysis of the current problem (mental retardation) has been carried out and students' learning difficulties have been presented with this disorder in a foreign language test.

In *chapter one*, attention is focused on the theoretical and practical aspects of the education of students with mild mental retardation.

In the first paragraph, a review of terminology was proposed, with children with "specific learning difficulties", children with "special educational needs" and children with "mental retardation" were presented in particular. A positive moment in this paragraph is the fact that PhD student Halacheva, in addition to the classic views of mental retardation, also quotes the modern tendencies in determining her mild degree, as difficulties closer to normal intelligence than to the specifics of moderate and severe mental retardation. The information here is presented correctly and with understanding.

In the second paragraph, attention is specifically focused on the principles of planning the training process in students with mental retardation. A competent characteristic of the mental development of students with mild mental retardation has been implemented. The focus is on the difficulties in the training arising from their disturbed mental activity, the significant delay in the processing of the information they perceived, as well as the specifics in their language and speech development. The characteristic manifestations of mild mental retardation are very

accurately outlined. On this basis, the principles of planning the training process are derived: the attitude of the teacher that the child wants and can study; establishing what a learner can motivate; setting a measurable and meaningful purpose for the child; The student's activity should be achievable.

The third paragraph derives the methodological methods and approaches to training. Emphasizing the importance of inclusive education, PhD student Halacheva argues the possibility of more effective involvement of students with mild mental retardation in the learning process. In this regard, the importance of the corrective-developing nature of the interactions with these students is also indicated. The most important correctional objective in foreign language education is drawn as an example, namely, the development of students' skills for adequate participation in a particular communication situation with appropriate language means.

Violeta Halacheva accepts that in the education of students with mild mental retardation, an important role to integrate these students into the learning activity have: organization of the lesson; adaptation of the educational content to the cognitive possibilities of students (reduction and simplification); organization of students (with the possibility of visualizing the meaning of new words with pictures - in foreign language training; frequent repetitions; individual and differentiated approach, etc.).

The importance of mental capacity and mental activity in determining the level of learning is emphasized. The thesis is allowed to distinguish three main components in the information and processing cycle (by RID)-introductory, in which the information is presented in small portions; formation of competencies by applying organizational strategies to help learning and final stage by consistent evaluation of results. At the end of the paragraph, methodological approaches are derived to ensure the effectiveness of the strategies applied to the training, such as: the multisensory approach, the game approach and the metacognitive approach.

In theoretical terms, *Chapter Two* treats three questions about the role of the text in the formation of functional literacy and communicative competence and difficulties in learning in a foreign language text.

In my opinion, the essence of the problem under consideration is presented here, and a number of considerations are given to it directly corresponding to it. On this basis, PhD student Halacheva constructs and offers a model for working with a learning text in English for students with mild mental retardation.

At the beginning of Chapter Second, a characteristic of the text is presented - as a result of a speech activity outlining the linguistic capacity in principle. Key to those of text linguistics, accepting the texts as basic units of speech (as a complete statement with a communication

purpose); As specific speech works, created by common rules (relating to the language, but not to speech) and as language units with a landmark character. In this context, the attention of the PhD student is directed to the narrative and descriptive texts in English textbooks. The conclusion that is required is that no such texts are present in the first and second grades. That is why the dissertation is focused on written teaching texts with narrative-disrespectful nature and related methodological developments.

Special attention is paid to the role of the text in the formation of functional literacy in order to build higher self-esteem and socialization of students. An example is an international study of the PISA (2018) educational results, according to which almost half of students in Bulgaria do not reach the minimum level of reading literacy. The conclusion that Halacheva reaches is that new approaches are needed to form functional literacy.

The role of the text in the construction of communicative competence was examined in a deliberate paragraph. The PhD student shows an excellent knowledge of modern theoretical productions and research on this problem. They are also successful in the foreign language training, indicating the importance of the methodological organization of the lesson and the individual characteristics of the students for the cognitive organization of vocabulary and the accumulation and automation of linguistic structures. The relevance and importance of the issue of perception and reproduction of text in the education of students with mental retardation, arising from the insufficient level of formation of competences in this field, is emphasized.

In the last paragraph of Chapter Second, the difficulties that the students with mild mental retardation meet when working with text are specifically and accurately outlined. Stepping on a number of studies of Bulgarian and foreign scientists and researchers, Violeta Halacheva brings out the typology of basic learning difficulties such as: poor indicative activity in finding text messages; misunderstanding of the text; Low level of awareness of logical structures; difficulties in determining the basic thought; Difficulties in text playback. It is logical that it is necessary to conclude that in order to optimize the work with the English text of students with mild mental retardation, it is necessary to develop and implement new didactic models.

The research part of the dissertation includes a third and fourth chapter, which presents the production of the experiment and the analysis of the results.

Chapter Three focuses on the essence of the study. The goal to which research is directed is to offer a specific didactic technology for implementing the learning process when working with a narrative text in the fourth grade containing effective ways to form communicative and new models for transforming the learning material for optimal absorption by students with mild mental retardation.

The tasks of the study are very well formulated, which reflect the sequence of realized activities set out in the dissertation. The scientific assumptions are drawn to the hypothesis that if the English language of students with mild mental retardation is applied didactic technology with relevant language tasks, then a positive effect can be expected-a more durable absorption of active vocabulary and language structures, as of the and improving reading skills with understanding and self -speaking production ..

The respondents participated in the study were 40 fourth grade students with mild mental retardation, respectively 20 students from Sofia and 20 - from Pazardzhik. All students are trained in a general education environment and are assisted by specialists in the respective RCPppo (in Sofia and Pazardzhik). For greater objectivity of the results, the examined persons are differentiated into two subgroups, depending on the test on which they worked and conditionally represented as group 1 and group 2.

The methods and learning resources used in conducting the experiment are correctly indicated. Two texts have been selected, with the same volume of words suitable for fourth grade training.

The study procedure includes three stages - finding, training and final.

In a separate paragraph, *the innovative didactic technology for working with text is presented in detail, as well as a model for optimizing the work of English text for fourth grade with students with mild mental retardation.* The model contains eight elements, tailored to the Common European Framework. For the purposes of the experiment, worksheets and 23 electronic study resources were created.

At the end of the third chapter, the details also describe the learning experiment and the final experiment.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis, as well as the interpretation of the results obtained and that subsequent on this basis, were made in chapter fourth. Primary data are illustrated through the respective figures and screenshots. They are analyzed and summarized according to the stated hypothesis. Comparative statistical methods (part of the methods of deductive statistics) were used for the purpose of the study. To check the differences between the two groups of respondents, T-TEST is applied to independent excerpts.

The PhD student skillfully and professionally presents the statistically significant differences included in the experimental analysis.

A comparative analysis of the results between the respondents studied in Experiment 1 (control stage) and experiment 2 (the finding stage) - before and after the training intervention

is presented. The number of correct answers to the respondents of the experiment 2 is many times higher than that of the respondents of experiment 1 in both selected texts.

Positive steps in this part of the dissertation can be determined as the correctness in the presentation and analysis of empirical data, as well as the relations of the results obtained to the basic searches in the study.

The results show that the application of intervention through innovative didactic tools (didactic technology) has a positive effect on all measured indices, which confirms the working hypothesis.

The conclusions of the work on the texts were made according to the stages of the study. The finding experiment outlines the main problems in the adoption of an English language learning text, regardless of the specific subject matter (difficulties in the overall perception of the text; in answers to questions; in producing self -speech, etc.).

The final experiment provides grounds for optimism based on the answers that students give to the questions on the specific texts. A technology is working that optimizes the text through work on individual parts; connecting the new vocabulary with visual stimuli; working with keywords; Including key expressions when answering questions; Use of predefined models and more.

The conclusion is a meaningful summary of the findings presented by the PhD student and a serious basis for the conclusions drawn.

Violeta Halacheva concludes that the application of a suitable methodological algorithm when working with a learning text has a positive effect not only on the degree of awareness of the content of the text by students with mild mental retardation, but also on their speaking skills realized by reproduction by students to a clearly set support model. Of particular importance is the finding that the attached model for working with text activates the interest of the students and enhances their desire to communicate in English.

The conclusions indicated by the PhD student Halacheva provoke reflections on the need to create and approve such methodological models that will increase the cognitive activity of students with special educational needs and their full inclusion in the learning process.

Contribution of the dissertation

The results of the study objectify the author's scientific contributions derived, which would be useful for both pedagogical practice and new scientific research in this field. I accept the PhD conclusions.

Of particular importance, in my opinion, the following contributions can be distinguished:

- ✓ Systematic representation of the role of the text in the foreign language education of students with mild mental retardation;
- ✓ A comprehensive methodological model for working with an English language learning text is proposed for students with fourth grade fourth mental retardation;
- ✓ The proposed methodological algorithm is suitable for both individual work and group training of students with mild mental retardation.

Critical notes and recommendations:

- ✓ Analyzes of the data from the finding stage are placed in the third chapter of the dissertation. I believe that the place of this information is in chapter fourth, where the other analyzes of the results of the experiment are.
- ✓ In the dissertation, an interesting idea that can be used in pedagogical practice is embedded. I recommend to Violeta Halacheva as a teacher to include in the methodological preparation of students to familiarize her with her learning tasks and electronic resources to optimize English training of students with light mental retardation, as well as to focus on participation in educational projects and actively presenting the methodological model for working with teaching text and author's results in scientific journals and international scientific forums.

My questions are:

- ✓ In determining the purpose of the dissertation, you direct the use of specific didactic technology to work with text in English in third and fourth grades. The contingent of the study is fourth grade students. The application presents the application of the didactic model of third grade work. Would you clarify this discrepancy?
- ✓ Do you think that the proposed methodological algorithm of work described in the dissertation can become part of the didactic technology of educators who work with other categories of students with special educational needs other than mild mental retardation?

Abstract and publications

The abstract, with a total volume of 36 pages and objectively reflects the content of the dissertation. It is logically well structured and presented at the significant points, the basic results and the contributions of the study.

The publications accompanying the dissertation are 3. They are published in the collections of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2021. They are all on the topic of the dissertation work and referred to English training of students with mild mental retardation.

CONCLUSION

PhD student Violeta Halacheva has fulfilled her obligations arising from the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria (ASDARB), the Rules for the Implementation of the Law on the Insurance Company, the Rules of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski ", as well as the obligations under the respective individual curriculum of the PhD student. All administrative procedures have been followed.

The dissertation developed by PhD student Halacheva, meets the requirements for writing this kind of scientific works. On the basis of the study, presented in the proposed dissertation work, of the correct analysis, conclusions and recommendations, of the found contributions, I give my positive assessment. I suggest that the revered scientific jury award the educational and scientific degree "PhD" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski "in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (*Special pedagogy*)
Violeta Dimitrova Halacheva.

28.09.2022

prof. d-r. Snezhana Nikolova

Shumen