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# Student Voices Form (Virtual) Language Classrooms

Silvie Prevratilova<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

A cohort of American students came to Prague for their Study Abroad in spring 2020. They signed up for a Czech language course but had to leave the country in the middle of the term and continue learning from homes. At the end of the term, they were asked to write a short reflective essay on how their motivation to learn Czech transformed throughout the term and what motivational factors they regarded as key for themselves. This text explores what the students have to say about their own learning experience from their unique study abroad experience and confirms that the integrative factor plays the most important role in the study abroad context.

## Abstract in Czech

V únoru roku 2020 zahájila skupina amerických studentů svůj semestrální studijní pobyt v České republice, jehož součástí tvořil povinný kurz češtiny pro začátečníky. Uprostřed semestru byli tito studenti nuceni nečekaně Prahu opustit kvůli koronavirové pandemii, vrátit se zpět domů a program dokončit online. Na konci kurzu češtiny psali reflektivní esej o vlastní motivaci k učení se češtině a její proměně po přechodu na distanční formu výuky. Příspěvek představuje zkušenost 34 studentů a faktory, které ovlivnily jejich motivaci. Výsledky studie

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potvrdily klíčovou roli potřeby integrace do cílové kultury, jež po návratu domů vedla k demotivaci, a nutnost adaptace sylabu kurzu při změně kontextu výuky.

## **Keywords:**

Attitudes, Czech, motivation, second language, reflective essays

Every year, thousands of students come to the Czech Republic for their Study Abroad. In the spring of 2020, just like every other semester, a cohort of nearly fifty students travelled to Prague from various US universities to study in our program where they attend a mandatory Elementary Czech course. This text reflects the experience of those students and the shifts in their motivation to learn the Czech language based on a small-scale survey comparing the sources of motivation before and after going online.

Researchers have been examining Study Abroad as a language learning context for decades (Carroll, 1967; Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2008), with a primary focus on the linguistic gains of the language learners. Other areas of interest have been identity, change in beliefs about language learning, and motivation. Unsurprisingly, the most intensely investigated languages have been widely taught languages: English, Spanish, French, German, or Russian. Very little is known about the students' motivation to learn a small language, such as Czech, and likewise, the sources of motivation and factors driving potential change in attitudes towards learning Czech. We know even less about how leaving the country and going online affected the students' motivation.

Under usual circumstances, the spring term runs from February to May and the compulsory Czech language course begins with an intensive introductory week and thereafter, takes place twice a week from 8:20 to 9:50 in the morning. The syllabus has been carefully designed to meet the students' needs while staying in Prague and learning Czech as a second language (the language of the country where the learner lives). It covers a range of issues such as meeting people, ordering at a café, shopping as well as making simple arrangements, apologizing, travel and talking about life in Prague. The course also covers a variety of socio-cultural aspects of living in the country and using the language. For the majority of our students, who never had learned a Slavic language before, learning Czech is a brand-new experience.

A recent study on American students living and studying in Prague for a semester suggested that they may suffer from an initial anxiety. Also, that the students' attitudes towards learning Czech often go through a turbulent curve from the initial mixed (or negative) attitude to a prevailing positive attitude at the end<sup>1</sup> (Prevratilova, 2019).

In the spring of 2020, students had to leave the country after six weeks of learning Czech and living in Prague. The whole program went online within days, and classes were taught through LifeSize, a platform that the program had instant access to, including on-site technical support. LifeSize served well for large group lectures, but it does not support group work in break-out rooms. However, the teachers had no choice as to what platform they could use, which aimed at keeping all the online courses in one format to secure technical support both for the teachers and the students as well as simplicity for the students, who did not need to navigate a variety of applications for different courses. After the abrupt, unprecedented turn to emergency online teaching, the lively and interactive face-to-face-lessons turned to meetings where the teachers tried to motivate and engage the learners in the new, disruptive environment. Although most of the students handed in their homework on time in sufficient quality, throughout the online sessions the students did not respond actively, they seemed to have forgotten most of what they had learned in the classes in Prague and the online classes were not enjoyable, unlike the face-to-face (FTF) classes. Their motivation to learn seemed to have stayed in Prague. From the desire to integrate into the local culture, their efforts transferred into the instrumental need to get the credit and a good grade on their transcript. The whole context of learning shifted from learning Czech as a second language to learning it as a foreign language (learning in the country where the target language is not spoken), which required a different pedagogical approach.

As teachers who always strive for learner autonomy and aim at covering areas of the language that are of immediate use for the students, we re-structured the syllabus completely, knowing that making students learn how to arrange a simple meeting in Czech is of no use at all. Since the students only valued the ability to speak Czech while staying in Prague, it quite possibly did not seem to make much sense to them to learn this skill. After their departure, they usually did not see whether or how it can be useful for them in the future. As we were aware of the shift in motivation, we identified two learning areas of special concern: linguistic and sociocultural. In the altered syllabus, very little

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<sup>1</sup> The study presented specific factors affecting motivation in the Study Abroad context (Prevratilova, 2019).

new language was supposed to be taught and students were going to recycle what they had learned in the first six weeks of class in two main tasks: The first was a presentation in Czech on a place or event in Prague memorable to them and secondly, a video summarizing their experience that showed how much Czech they had learned. Both tasks were subsequently shared among students for peer evaluation and discussion (both in Czech and in English).

Later in the semester, the socio-cultural aspect of living and possibly working in a foreign country was going to receive more attention. Also, there would be a discussion in English on specific areas of intercultural communication with a focus on the comparison of American and Czech cultures that highlighted the potential use in the students' future professional careers.

As one of the final tasks, students could choose to write a reflective essay about how they view their own process of motivation towards learning Czech from the beginning to the end of the semester. The aim was to trace the students' path through their unique language learning experience. We sought answers to questions relating to 1) the students' initial motivation to learn Czech and their attitude to learning and using the language, 2) the shift of motivation after leaving the country and going online during the lockdown, 3) the sources of motivation and de-motivation among those students. Thirty-four students agreed to participate in the study. Their essays were analysed with Atlas.ti software.

As predicted, the analysis of data showed a mixture of initial attitudes ranging from anxiety and the fear of failure to excitement and the desire to learn more about the local culture through its language. Their attitudes concerned emotional, socio-cultural as well as linguistic aspects of language learning. 50 % of the students admitted that they were taking Czech because they had to. Some were worried about their academic success due to their "inadequate linguistic self" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) or certain learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Others said that they were excited to learn a new, exotic language and were hoping to get to know the local culture better. When being specific about the motivating and demotivating factors in FTF part of the semester, they repeatedly referred to the first days of the classes when they felt overwhelmed by the class. They explained this was because everything was new and different from any languages they had learned before. One student wrote: *"I was a bit overwhelmed by the language at first because it was so vastly different from what I had ever encountered and I found it hard [sic] to catch onto than Spanish, which I had taken for many years,"* or: *"At first, I felt a bit afraid of this language as it felt and sounded nothing like English."* However, the motivation

rose after several days or weeks passed. Most students found that despite their inadequate linguistic self or learning disabilities, they were able to cope with the course content and apply it to their own personal experience. The main factor causing the increase in motivation was the integrative element of the course syllabus which aimed at topics immediately useful outside of class. This was frequently pointed out by the students. One student wrote: *“I quickly began to realize how useful it was to have a baseline knowledge of Czech language for everyday interactions,”* or: *“After even just a week of Czech, I had the tools to have more confidence [...] I could greet people, say please and thank you, and understand basic terms. This was very motivating for me in the classroom,”* and: *“Soon after our first lesson in Czech, I started to see how valuable it was in my everyday life in Prague and it helped me stay motivated to learn as there was such a tangible positive result.”* The situations when they used Czech were mainly grocery shopping and basic conversations with staff in cafes and restaurants. In some cases, the desire to interact with locals represented a source of demotivation: when the students failed in communication outside class either because they lacked the linguistic tools or were not able to pronounce the words correctly and the communication partner did not comprehend, their motivation was endangered, which is not surprising: Dörnyei suggested lack of success as the third main demotivating factor in language classes (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 148).

The state of emergency, lockdown, and the order from their home universities to come back to the US caused the main motivational shift. The students had to pack and leave within hours, being worried about the ban on travel declared by the president of the USA. They responded emotionally to the abrupt end of their study abroad. One student recalled: *“Leaving Prague was extremely abrupt, as I got an email to leave from my home university at 4 am and booked a flight to leave within 6 hours. I really didn’t have time to process what was happening, but I was disappointed that I really didn’t accomplish my cultural or academic goals,”* or as another stated: *“I was extremely upset when I had to leave Prague. I had both sadness and anger when I had to leave.”* Some descriptions of their feelings at the time of departure were moving: *“I am not embarrassed to say I could not stop crying the entirety of the metro ride to the airport and the flight home. I was so frustrated and upset to the point of tears that I had no control over the situation, and I would never have the chance to live in Prague again.”* Others also used the following adjectives to describe their hurt feelings, such as disappointed (which appeared eight times), sad, shocked, heartbroken, upset, angry, depressed, and devastated.

After the return to their homes, students mostly found it hard to adapt to the new learning situation. Some students reported that they were used to studying in a school environment and relaxing at home. Suddenly, they had to adapt to learning from home, which a lot of them found extremely hard. One student said: *“Whenever I am in my house and trying to do schoolwork as opposed to being away at college feels very strange to me and I struggle motivating myself,”* and another wrote: *“Across all of my classes, the desire to continue once returning back to the US was decreased just because home for the past couple years has become separated from school. When I return home, usually it is some form of a break, and this made it somewhat difficult to get readjusted to classes at home.”* The sudden switch to distance learning caused stress and discomfort. Learning Czech from their homes in the USA seemed redundant due to the lack of practice and social contact, which made learning a huge burden in other classes, too. One said: *“To be frank, learning at home was a poor experience,”* or more specifically: *“Getting home, I honestly had, and still have, no motivation to learn in general. I have never been able to study at home, so this is my worst nightmare. It has been especially tough as every class is a constant reminder that I am not in Prague, a place I came to love.”* Unsurprisingly, 100% of students expressed a massive drop in motivation to learn Czech, since the main motivating factors (the desire to interact with the local culture) disappeared: *“Upon returning home, Czech felt almost unnecessary and sadly like a reminder that I was supposed to still be in Prague.”* The teachers of Czech confirmed that the lack of motivation and social contact made it difficult to interact in the online environment and motivate the students to continue learning. Even with the syllabus adapted to intercultural communication (which half of the students explicitly welcomed) only two students out of the total of thirty-four saying that they still wanted to continue learning more Czech as a language.

Living in Prague was the strongest motivator just as leaving Prague was the strongest de-motivator. When in Prague, students regarded the course as very useful and hands-on. After going online and being forced to learn from home, the sources of motivation needed to be reassessed. The intercultural aspect seemed to be more in line with their needs or future careers and most students appreciated the shift in the syllabus after their departure. However, the previously mentioned assignment of a presentation and video which were peer-evaluated (both tasks were done in Czech) made them practice and maintain what they had learned in Prague. These assignments received positive reactions, such as: *“Once we were sent home, the best assignments were the presentation and video,”* or: *“We made videos of us having a conversation which I found both fun and great practice at improving my Czech speaking skills.”*

Several students commented on the course as being their connection to Prague or a flashback to their stay. To quote them: “*When the class went online, it was still engaging because it brought me back to my abroad experience,*” and: “*I then realized learning Czech was my only remaining connection to Prague, so I embraced it and had a better attitude towards it. My motivation to learn Czech was now to keep a connection with Prague and to learn a unique skill.*”

The results of our survey have confirmed how the context of studying and living in the country where the language is spoken is unique and furthermore how strong this context is as the source of motivation to learn the local language. We also learned how challenging and demanding the sudden and violent turn to distant learning for most people was, and additionally, how strongly the move may affect motivation going forward towards learning not only a foreign language but towards learning in general. Furthermore, the importance of reconsidering students’ needs in any type of learning condition proved to be key in syllabus design (Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020).

We believe that students will be back to study and live in Prague and that they will be taking courses that will have been uniquely designed to accommodate their life here.

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## Author Biography

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