

Subjective perception of selected phenomena in the Czech language¹

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Abstract: The case study focuses on the subjectively perceived challenges of learning Czech as a foreign language in an academic environment, especially in practically oriented courses. The study is comparative in nature. It uses a questionnaire survey to investigate the attitudes of two groups of students towards their specific views on preformulated statements concerning (1) their overall perception of Czech, (2) selected issues of Czech language acquisition, and (3) some grammatical rules. Despite its subjective nature based solely on the students' feelings and impressions, the study can contribute to the learning process by providing insight into their opinions and perspectives after taking a two-semester Czech course, the

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main goal of which is to familiarize students with the language and provide them with a so-called survival course. Understanding their perspectives can enable educators to adapt language teaching more effectively. It is particularly positive that students see the possibility of reaching a communicative level in the not too distant future, despite the problems that learning Czech brings.

Keywords: Czech as a foreign language, questionnaire survey, Czech language acquisition, grammatical rules, communication level

Introduction

Students of Czech have to deal with many challenges posed by this Slavic language marked by its specific pronunciation with unique sounds, difficult consonant clusters, vocalic quantity having a distinctive function, and stress patterns. Moreover, complexities of Czech grammar, with developed inflection of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and some numerals (case system) together with the verb conjugation system pose another significant set of challenges.

However, not all students face these challenges equally. Those whose mother tongues are of Slavic origin may find the task of acquiring another Slavic language easier, as they could potentially make use of numerous similarities between their native languages and Czech. The shared Slavic background may provide a more intuitive grasp of Czech grammar rules and may be helpful regarding pronunciation acquisition rules as well.

The similarities are not equal among all Slavic languages due to their division into East, South, and West subgroups. Generally, the languages within the groups are historically closer to each other than the languages among the groups.

In order to add an external view on the shared phenomena within Slavic languages, Steven Franks, an American scientist concerned with comparative Slavic morphosyntax, authored the chapter “The Slavic Languages” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Syntax* (2008) and stated that “Slavic (or Slavonic) languages represent a fairly homogeneous group of languages spoken in a large territory of central and eastern Europe, as well as Russian Asia” and discusses the similar (and robust) case system, relatively free word order, and issues

related to case and agreement. Also, he acknowledges the complexity of aspect noting that “aspect is a classic and pervasive problem in Slavic morphosyntax”.

Moreover, students whose native (or already acquired) languages involve some version of declension and/or conjugation systems are at an advantage as they are familiar with the concept of multiple forms of a single word.

The study highlights the significant role that an individual’s linguistic background plays in the acquisition of Czech. Despite its subjective nature based exclusively on the feelings and impressions of the students, the study may contribute to the learning process by providing insights into their opinions and perspectives after they have completed a two-semester long Czech course whose main purpose is to familiarize students with the language and provide them with so-called survival course. Understanding their perspectives may allow educators to tailor language instruction more effectively.

The study explores the attitudes of two groups of students concerning their specific viewpoints on the selected Czech language statements regarding their (1) overall perception of Czech, (2) selected Czech language acquisition issues, and, very superficially, its (3) most fundamental grammar rules.

Materials and Methods

The participants of the research involved students with no linguistic background studying in various English study programs offered at two Czech universities – the University of Veterinary Sciences Brno and Palacký University Olomouc. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire administered via Microsoft Forms, which consisted of ten statements evaluated on a Likert scale² with the follo-

² Likert scale-based questionnaire for (1) non-Slavic respondents https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yVKNHus5G9pjqlLUk_X5xs4CusBeUtwNjY1OXY-kE/edit [07/16/24] and for (2) Slavic respondents <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gyqdepbPDEsV4QkSbJVeZqkt9EWnQaARML2kH6QeX6c/edit> [07/16/24].

wing options: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” The statements were supplemented with two open-ended questions concerning easy and difficult issues in Czech, giving respondents the opportunity to freely express their opinion.

After data collection, the dataset was divided based on the answers to the question “Where are you from?” into Slavic and non-Slavic students, with the Slavic students serving as the control group. The research group, consisting of 39 non-Slavic students, was diverse, represented by 16 French, 7 Greek, 3 Italian, 3 Korean, and 5 German students, the rest was formed by single representatives from Israel, Canada, Austria, Algeria, China, Ireland, Mexico, and India. The control group included 9 Slavic students who, incidentally, represented all three Slavic subgroups (4 Polish – West subgroup, 3 Ukrainian – East subgroup, and 2 Slovenian students – South subgroup). Despite the control group not being large, it allowed for comparative analysis between students from different linguistic backgrounds.

The results section is divided into three topically based parts:

- a) Language acquisition-related questions,
- b) Foreign language perception questions, and
- c) Grammar-related questions.

Results

The results of the study, gathered from 39 non-Slavic and 9 Slavic respondents through 10 Likert-scale based statements and two open-ended questions, provided an insight into the students’ **subjective** perception of the Czech language in the early stage of learning.

The questionnaire

The first two questions concerned the background of the respondents. The first one asked about their nationality (see the Materials and Methods section), allowing for the consequent division into the Slavic and non-Slavic groups. The second question concerned the time pe-

riod for which the respondents had been studying Czech with no respondent exceeding 18 months of learning. These short-term courses are practical, centered around the basics of Czech and their main purpose is to introduce students to the language as a part of their cultural experience.

All respondents study in Czechia, so they are supposed to be immersed in the Czech language. Therefore, their exposure is not limited to the time spent in class but extends to their daily lives. This consistency given by the similar learning period, their current language environment, non-linguistic background, the knowledge of English and, consequently, the same writing system utilizing the Latin alphabet, are all beneficial for the study, making the responses more relevant.

The pie charts with research group answers (non-Slavic) will be contrasted with those from the control (Slavic) group. This comparison will help illustrate the differing perspectives occurring between the two groups.

a) Foreign language perception-related statements



Graph 1. The Czech language sounds euphonic (pleasant) to me

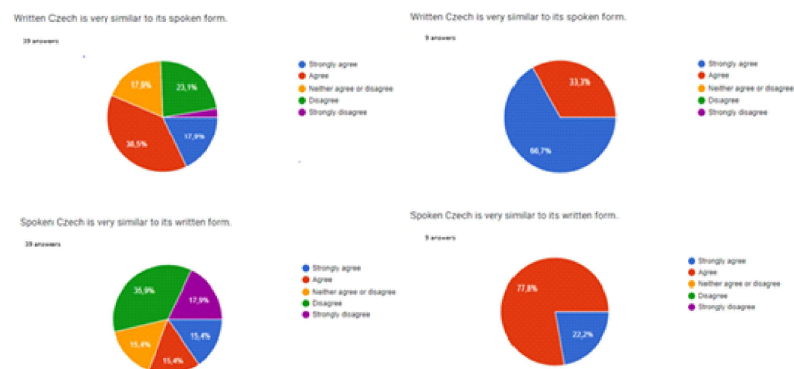
The question regarding the perception of Czech's pleasantness to ear yielded various answers. 35.9% of students agreed (23.1%) or strongly agreed (12.8%) that Czech sounded euphonic to them. What we found particularly interesting was that while not many students strongly agreed, all three Korean respondents did.

On the other hand, 33.4% of students disagreed (23.1%) or strongly disagreed (10.3%). Such a high rate may signify that learning Czech, besides being quite challenging on its own, is further complicated by the fact that some students do not consider it pleasant sounding. This may directly impact the motivation for learning which, regarding our sample, may have been influenced by the relationship the students had made with the Czech language and also by their mother tongue background.

The control group participants showed significantly more positive attitudes towards Czech euphony with no negative responses. This may have been influenced by the linguistic proximity and familiarity of the sounds shared within Slavic languages.

The perception of a language's pleasantness to ear can impact a student's language acquisition experience. For instance, German is often cited as a language that some learners find less euphonic. Research into this topic is not extensive. One study is based on a Quora feed (Reiterer et al., 2020) trying to investigate why some languages are perceived as melodious while others are not with German being considered as harsh. Moreover, there was an article published in 2014 by Matthew Jenkin in Guardian entitled *What makes a language attractive – its sound, national identity or familiarity?* which was concerned with the circumstances making one language more attractive than the other. In the article, he quoted Charles V, saying, "*I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse.*" Also, Mark Twain wrote an essay titled *The Awful German Language*, which humorously explores the obstacles of learning German. Last but not least, when you type the question "Which language is the most aggressive sounding?" into Google, the answer given is – German. Language learners may find languages they perceive as melodious easier to pick up, as the positive aesthetic experience may enhance motivation and engagement with the language.

In the light of our results, we should take into account that students' motivation to study Czech may be affected by their perception of its potential unpleasantness to the ear.



Graph 2. Written Czech is very similar to its spoken form and vice versa

Other two questions touched upon the substantial similarities between the written and spoken forms of Czech. The statement *Written Czech is very similar to its spoken form* focused on reading aloud, while the statement *Spoken Czech is very similar to its written form* mostly investigated sound recognition and writing.

As we can see, the responses differed significantly. Even though 56.4% of respondents agreed (38.5%) and strongly agreed (17.9%) with the statement that *Written Czech is very similar to its spoken form*, the reverse statement, *Spoken Czech is very similar to its written form*, revealed a very different outcome. Here, 53.8% of students disagreed (35.9%) or strongly disagreed (17.9%).

Although the results may be surprising due to a commonly accepted assumption that spoken and written forms of Czech are considered to be quite similar because of its phonetic nature, the reality is quite intricate. Recognizing this similarity requires practice, but once students have become familiar with both forms, this process becomes gradually less challenging.

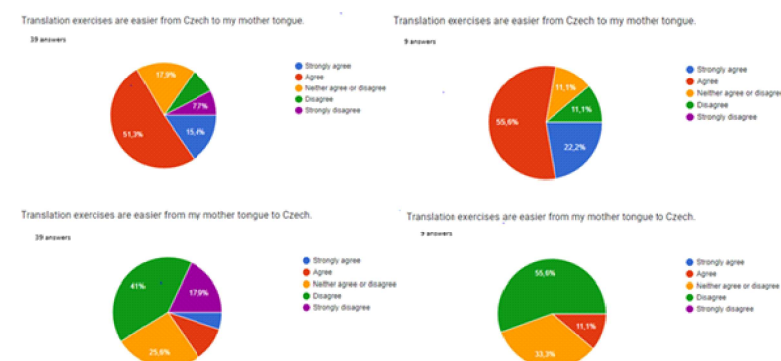
The Czech stress pattern, which falls on the first syllable (or an adjacent preposition), differs from the variable stress in, for example, English or French. Together with new sounds found in Czech, strong assimilation processes, and linking the sound recognition may be quite difficult in the early stages of learning Czech.

This discrepancy clearly suggests that, while students recognize the phonetic consistency when reading aloud, they find the process of sound recognition and writing more challenging.

Our results demonstrate that teachers should consider dedicating more time and practice to reading out loud in the class to help students identify and recognize similarities between the spoken and written forms of the words. Over time, it will help them establish and process these spoken vs. written connections which inherently exist in the Czech language. Our results suggest that these similarities may be quite difficult to grasp by non-Slavic students of Czech which deserves due attention.

As expected, the control group demonstrated that this written and spoken Czech dilemma was non-existent for them after no more than 18 months of studying Czech.

Teaching of the Czech language to non-Slavic students brings numerous challenges (see Introduction) and incorporation of reading out loud on a regular basis may ease those arising from its specific phonemes.



Graph 3. Translation exercises are easier from Czech to my mother tongue and vice versa

The students were asked to consider two individual statements:
(1) *Translation exercises are easier from Czech to my mother tongue*

and (2) *Translation exercises are easier from my mother tongue to Czech*. We wanted them to consider the statements individually because the translation tasks pose different challenges depending on the direction of the translation.

It is essential to mention that the respondents speak English at a level that enables them to study in an English study program and also that the Czech courses are taught through English. With the exception of one Irish and one Canadian student, there were no English native speakers in the sample. Therefore, English serves as a mediating language and it is likely that some students translate the exercises directly into English but some translate through their mother tongue to English.

The results demonstrate very similar trends in both groups. The statement *Translation exercises are easier from Czech to my mother tongue* showed that 66.7% of students in the research group agreed (51.3%) or strongly agreed (15.4%). The underlying reason lies in the fact that these exercises usually reflect previous lessons quite rigidly, ensuring that students are capable of translating phrases or sentences based on their already gathered knowledge. At this stage of learning, the students' vocabulary in the target language is not extensive, and they look for the expressions just in their already acquired (and quite limited) portfolio.

In the opposite direction of the translation (from mother tongue to Czech) the situation significantly differs with 17.9% of students strongly disagreeing and 41% disagreeing with the statement. As visible, the opposition against this statement was strong because students have a vast portfolio of expressions and diverse structures at hand in their mother tongue and they are inherently affected by the number of possible synonyms applicable to a particular sentence which is to be translated.

As we can see, the control group confirms the trend, so this phenomenon does not seem to be influenced by the time for which a student has studied the target language. The disagreeing and strongly disagreeing groups were proportionately smaller.

Our results confirm that the majority (but not all) of students find translating from their mother tongue into Czech generally more challenging than translating from Czech to their mother tongue. These results were anticipated and are in compliance with commonly accepted and logical assumptions about the translation exercises. We wanted to emphasize that both directions of translation are important. The more challenging direction, from the mother tongue to the target language, requires significantly more effort. Although commonly viewed as difficult, it forces the students to employ complex processes on their side, namely by means of "*contrastive analysis of the source and the target text [which] develops metalinguistic awareness of the structural similarities and differences*" (Nord, 2005). These strategies could help students establish firm connections between the two languages.

In our view, translation exercises are essential. However, there are differing perspectives on their active use among teachers. In the era of direct and communicative methods, translation exercises get a mixed reputation.

For instance, Brita Banitz (2022) mentions the following: "*As an active foreign language teacher at a private university in central Mexico, I can attest to the fact that using translation in the language classroom is considered taboo in modern-day language teaching*". In the article, she aptly summarizes a few perspectives of teachers of different languages worldwide. Carreres and Noriega-Sánchez (2011), for example, pointed out that

[...] there has been a marked reluctance and often open hostility regarding the use of translation in language teaching" (p. 283). Drahota-Szabó (2019) lamented that activities involving translation have been neglected in German as a Foreign Language courses in Hungary. Hernández (1996), considering Spanish as a Foreign Language courses in England, confirmed that the mere mentioning of the word translation causes negative reactions in language teachers. Mbeudeu (2017) shared that in Cameroon, translation-based activities in English as a Foreign Language classes "should be totally avoided" (p. 76) and Cook (2010) even argued that "translation has been outlawed" (p. 3) forcing teachers who want to use it to go "underground" (p. 3).

Paul Kaye, an English teacher and journalist wrote: Translation was a significant part of ELT for a long time, and then a significant

missing part for a long time also. With the arrival and then total dominance of communicative methodologies, translation was quickly consigned to the past, along with other ‘traditional’ tools such as dictation, reading aloud and drills.³

Caroline Rossi et al. (2021) presented a well-documented article emphasizing the importance and long-term impact of translation exercises in practice, improving not only students’ lexical skills but also their grasp of grammar.

It seems that we are currently witnessing a new era of translation exercises returning to the spotlight. Colina and Albrecht (2021) from the University of Arizona pointed out the following: “We find ourselves in a new language teaching landscape, and the use of L1, once completely out of pedagogical sight, has come back into view.”

More and more scientists support the need to use a mother tongue or a mediating language in teaching (Holthouse, 2006; Keller 2016; Yadav, 2014; Rocha 2011). Ping (2024) adds his perspective on the effectiveness of translation not only in classes with students sharing the same mother tongue (Chinese in his case) but also mixed classes, which is our case.

These exercises substantially contribute to a better understanding of the studied structures by placing them in context. As a very complex type of exercise requiring a constant need of code switching, translation is highly effective both ways – from a mother tongue to a new language and vice versa.

b) Language acquisition related statements

We are aware that this question pointed students at a certain direction. However, Czech is generally perceived to be quite difficult so the question stemmed from that presumption. 82% of non-Slavic students agreed (53.8%) or strongly agreed (28.2%) with this statement. There-

³ Kaye, P. (n.d.). Translation activities in the language classroom. Teaching-English (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowning-subject/articles/translation-activities-language>) [accessed: 11/07/24].

fore, the vast majority of the non-Slavic respondents consider Czech to be difficult to learn.



Graph 4. Based upon my 2-semester experience, Czech is a difficult language to learn

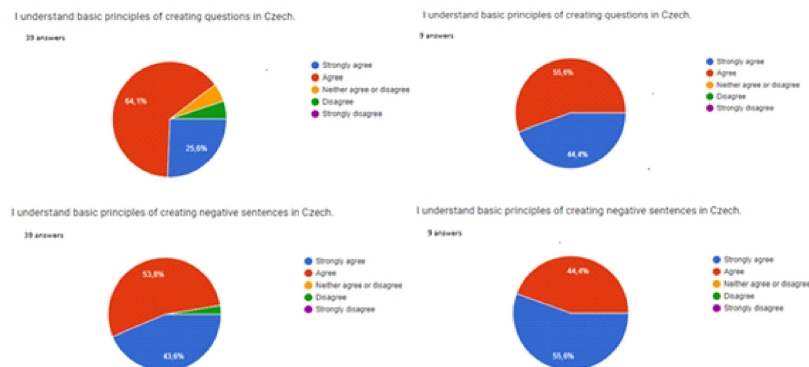
The control group yielded a completely contrasting results. Although the language proximity is generally considered beneficial and facilitating, it cannot be taken as a fact that it is always easy to learn a “similar” language. In our sample, however, this assumption has proved to be true.

Graph 5. I feel that I am able to reach a communicative level in Czech in a few years

We decided not to limit the timeframe of the question to one year, instead, we extended it to a more flexible period, because one year may seem too short given that Czech is not the respondents’ main area of study. This question yielded a positive outcome with 82% of students agreeing (61,5%) or strongly agreeing (20,5%) which indicates that a significant percentage of the respondents felt that they were able to reach a communicative level in Czech. Even though the term “communicative” is perceived differently by students, with each having their own definition of what constitutes a communicative level, we collected their perspectives regardless of these variations in perception. Our respondents do not perceive Czech to be overwhelmingly difficult or incomprehensible as they see a realistic possibility of attaining a communicative level in the not-too-distant future. It seems that students are mostly optimistic about their Czech progress, which is a very positive outcome.

As expected, the control group students had no doubts about reaching a communicable level in Czech in the designated time period.

c) Grammar-related statements



Graph 6

We incorporated three statements regarding basic grammar features in Czech which are easy and systematic, but they definitely require practice. In many languages (English, French, German, etc.), the formation of question and negative forms is complex on its own, but this is not true in Czech. While conjugation and declension complicate Czech grammar, the processes of forming questions and negatives are relatively straightforward.

As we can see, the same trend is visible regarding both questions and both groups. When it comes to formation of questions, only a few students in the research group decided to disagree or had no opinion. Even though the proportion of these students was small, we suppose that their answers were influenced by the fact that there is no specific way of making questions in Czech except for the intonation change. Possibly, some respondents may have been thinking about applicable grammar rules used for making questions which may have confused them.



Graph 7

In the case of formation of negative sentences, the answers were even more positive with almost all students agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

The control group showed no negative attitudes toward the two statements regarding basic Czech grammar rules. This suggests that they do not pose any problems in the later stages of learning Czech.

The statement regarding the recognition of tenses is more complex, but overall, it is quite easy to determine if a sentence is in the past, present, or future in Czech. The goal is not to teach students to form tenses precisely, but instead, to provide them with a framework that will enable them to recognize the tenses. This understanding helps students navigate the language more effectively, even if their usage is not yet perfect.

As we can see, the respondents generally agreed (53.8%) or strongly agreed (15.5%) that they were capable of recognizing Czech tenses. This indicates that tense recognition is a manageable topic for learners and suggests that it can and should be introduced to students of Czech in the early stages of learning.

It needs to be noted that the tense recognition is substantially impacted by the verbal aspect, especially in relation to present forms of the perfective verbs that serve to express future in Czech. These verbs could be integrated in the teaching process at a later stage because their understanding is easier when students are already familiar with a few basic and less complicated imperfective verbs.

The open-ended questions

In addition to giving their opinions on the Likert scale, the respondents were encouraged to formulate their views on two questions. The first open-ended question asked, *What do you consider to be easy in Czech?* and the second one, *What do you consider to be difficult in Czech?*

The open-ended questions – the research group

The answers varied from everything is difficult to nothing is difficult with many options in between. The respondents mentioned that learning vocabulary topics like colors, numbers, food items and, for example, animals is not difficult. Also, they mentioned easy formation of questions and negatives, which corresponds to the grammar-related Likert scale statements. Conjugation of the verbs in the present tense seemed easy to them and reading posed no significant issues. They also pointed out that creating adjective forms is not difficult if they know what gender the corresponding noun is.

Conversely, many respondents found Czech pronunciation to be particularly challenging, some mentioned the ř sound and stress pattern. Grammar in general was another common area of difficulty, some respondents specified the recognition of male/female forms, Czech case system, and plural forms, while a few students mentioned the overall difficulty of Czech caused by multiple forms of many words, predominantly nouns and verbs.

The open-ended questions – the control group

The answers in the control group were much more conciliatory, with the majority of respondents stating that (almost) everything is fine because of the similarities to their mother tongue. When asked what they consider to be difficult, they mentioned word endings, writing i/y, and gender recognition. Also, the ř sound, stress patterns, and people speaking fast seemed to be making Czech difficult for some Slavic students.

One student mentioned that *“Czech is very different not only from my mother tongue but also from English”* and another one wrote, *“very different grammar; not that similar to the languages you usually learn at school”*, suggesting that the students are unable to make many connections with their already acquired languages. Another one mentioned that *“there are fewer relations with Latin language”*, implying that they are not able to apply derivation effectively. A few students stressed the fact that there are *“too many forms of everything”*, or *“huge amounts of forms”*, or even that learning Czech *“needs a ridiculous amount of time”*.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that language proximity not only determines the positive or negative attitude towards Czech in the early stages of learning, but also impacts the (subjectively perceived) success rate and motivation for further study. The statement regarding the pleasantness of Czech to the ear has shown that the perception of Czech is quite diverse. This varied response highlights the subjective nature of language perception, influenced by individual linguistic backgrounds and personal preferences. Moreover, it even shapes their opinion on whether a language sounds euphonic to them.

Translation exercises are important and, as the study implies, especially the direction from the student's mother tongue (mediated through English) to Czech deserves more attention. Translation exercises are complex and require not only repetitive practice, but also appropriate assignments, which rely heavily on the skills and experience of the teacher.

The proximity of the written and spoken Czech is perceived by the students substantially more in the written-to-spoken direction than the other way around. This finding indicates that the spoken-to-written direction should be practiced more, for example, through dictation exercises, that will help students establish connections between the Czech sound system and its written forms by means of writing. Once students

get used to the rules, they may gradually find Czech sound recognition less unpredictable.

The research suggests that the introduction of some grammar rules may not need to be postponed to later stages of learning Czech because they do not seem to pose a significant issue for Czech language learners. They include formation of negative sentences and questions as well as basics of tense recognition because these areas are not particularly difficult in Czech.

Some statements yielded a high rate of “neither agree nor disagree”, indicating that students do not have or do not want to express their views. Given their background, this is understandable, as their field of study is not linguistic and formulating opinions on certain language-related topics may be quite distant for them.

What we consider particularly positive is that students, despite the challenges pertaining to Czech, see the possibility of attaining a communicative level in the not too-distant future. This implies that they do not feel discouraged by the complexities of Czech, and their motivation seems to be retained. This optimistic outlook is important for language learning.

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