



From Survival to Communication: Effective Strategies for Teaching Czech to Erasmus+ Students

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present methods and practical tips for teaching Czech to students coming to the Czech Republic for one or two semesters as part of the Erasmus+ program. The Czech Republic presents a specific linguistic environment in which communicating in everyday situations solely in foreign languages can be challenging, especially outside major tourist hubs. It is therefore essential to equip students with basic socio-cultural knowledge and language skills so they can cope with everyday situations in the Czech environment. To identify the specific situations in which students need Czech, we conducted a questionnaire survey between 2021 and 2025 with 163 respondents. The findings suggest that the Survival Approach, utilizing formulaic language, best meets the identified needs of incoming students by effectively supporting their willingness to communicate (WTC). At the level of specific teaching units, we found the Scaffolded Language Emergence (SLE) approach to be particularly useful. SLE not only encourages WTC but also minimizes the reliance on an intermediary language (typically English), addressing a common issue in Erasmus+ language courses.

Keywords: Czech as a foreign language; Erasmus+; Survival Approach; formulaic language; Scaffolded Language Emergence

1. Introduction

Study stays by international students at Czech host universities are an important part of the internationalization of higher education institutions, a process that receives significant attention in the strategic plans of most Czech universities, individual faculties, and other university departments. In this study, we are particularly interested in the mobility of international students who come to the Czech Republic through the Erasmus+ program, as these students make up the vast majority of students enrolled in beginner-level Czech language courses.

International students come to the Czech Republic from many different countries. In addition to students from Slavic countries, whose cultures are similar to ours, we primarily work with students from completely different cultural backgrounds. Students from Slavic countries often already have at least a basic knowledge of the Czech language and Czech culture upon arrival in our country; they know basic greetings and phrases, whereas students from non-Slavic countries usually have no command of Czech at all and use English as their primary language of communication. However, in many places in the Czech Republic, it is still difficult to communicate in English even in everyday situations (shopping, services, etc.).

This study aimed to identify the situations in which Erasmus+ students most frequently need knowledge of Czech, and, based on the survey results, to select effective teaching strategies and methods for teaching Czech to non-native speakers that will help our students succeed in those situations.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 ERASMUS+

Based on the Support Study for the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 Interim Evaluation and the Erasmus+ 2014–2020 Final Evaluation, the Erasmus+ programme is defined as follows: Erasmus+ is the European Union's (EU's) programme in the fields of education and training, youth and sport. It is one of the EU's most visible success stories. It builds on the achievements of its long history, since the Erasmus programme was originally established in 1987, and also on those of other pre-existing European programmes in the fields of education and training, youth and sport, covering both intra-European as well as international partnerships. Erasmus+ was established in 2014 as a result of the integration of all previously existing EU programmes implemented during the period 2007-2013 in the fields of education,



training, youth and sport: Lifelong Learning¹, Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Edulink, Tempus, Alfa and Preparatory Actions in Sport.

The general objective of Erasmus+ is to support, in particular through learning mobility, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to drive innovation, and to strengthen European identity and active citizenship. It does this through: supporting and financing the mobility of individuals (Key Action 1, KA1); cooperation among organisations and institutions (Key Action 2, KA2); support to policy development and cooperation (Key Action 3, KA3); and teaching, learning, research and debates on European integration matters (Jean Monnet Actions, JMA) [1].

International students coming to Czech universities under the Erasmus+ program generally have the option to include beginner-level Czech language courses in their study plans during their stay in the Czech Republic. These courses are a full-fledged part of the so-called Learning Agreement, are awarded ECTS credits (at the University of West Bohemia, students earn 5 ECTS credits for completing the course), and both the sending and host universities must approve their inclusion in the student's study plan. Czech language courses for Erasmus+ students are also available to students arriving as Freemovers.

The number of students in the Czech language course for beginners at the University of West Bohemia is shown in the table below:

Table 1. Number of students from 2021 to 2026.

Students / Semesters	WS 21/22	SS 21/22	WS 22/23	SS 22/23	WS 23/24	SS 23/24	WS 24/25	WS 25/26	Total
Erasmus+ and Free Movers students at the UWB	144	102	144	96	162	84	165	168	1065
Students in Czech language courses	47	42	53	46	53	36	51	47	375

2.2 Czech as a Foreign Language

According to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), the primary training institution for the U.S. Department of State, which prepares American diplomats and foreign affairs professionals for international assignments, the Czech language is considered difficult for English-speaking native speakers to learn. Based on the average time students need to reach a "Professional Working Proficiency," the FSI has divided languages into five categories. In the US government's language, this corresponds to a score of "Speaking-3/Reading-3" (S-3/R-3) on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale, roughly equivalent to B2/C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The Czech language is in the fourth category. Students usually need about 44 weeks, or 1100 class hours, to reach S-3/R-3. The languages in this category are described as languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English. The Czech language is in this category, along with several other Slavic languages, such as Slovak and Croatian, as well as Hungarian, Hebrew, Uzbek, Vietnamese, and Zulu [2].

Czech is a Slavic language. It is written using the extended Latin alphabet (the complete Czech alphabet, including diacritics, has 42 letters) and follows a predominantly phonological system. Most sounds are common in other languages as well, but many international students find it difficult to pronounce words containing clusters of consonants. Distinguishing vowel length is also often a challenge. However, the greatest difficulty in Czech lies in its complex grammar and rich vocabulary. Czech is an inflected language, meaning it not only conjugates verbs but also uses declension for nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and numerals. Declension means that a single word can take on multiple endings. By choosing the appropriate ending (which always corresponds to the relevant case), the speaker expresses the word's function in the sentence and its relationship to other sentence elements, such as whether it is the subject or object of the sentence. Thanks to declension, it is not necessary to adhere to a fixed word order in Czech as strictly as, for example, in English or French; the function of a word is expressed by its form, not its position in the sentence. Word order can thus, to a certain extent, help the speaker express finer nuances of meaning, since in Czech the most important information is usually at the end of the sentence. To express even more precise relationships between words, Czech uses a rich system of prepositions. Czech uses 7 cases in both the singular and plural and three grammatical genders, masculine (animate and inanimate), feminine, and neuter. In addition to the aforementioned



declension and rich prepositional system, students, especially those who do not speak a Slavic language, often find it difficult to use verb aspect correctly and to navigate the system of prefixes. Given the nature of the Czech language and the need for students to learn to communicate, at least in the most common everyday situations, within a short period of time, the survival approach appears to be effective for this specific audience.

2.3 Survival Approach

The survival approach in language learning is not attributed to a single author, but rather to the combined work of applied linguists, educators, and language advocates who created these systems for travelers, expatriates, and endangered language preservation. A highly regarded work in this field is the 1991 study by applied linguists Paul Nation and David Crabbe, in which they outlined a functional-conceptual approach to creating survival-oriented thematic dictionaries for travelers. In their research, they prioritized short but highly useful phrases for immediate communication: The aim of this study is to provide a list based on a principled approach that will give learners an immediate and useful return for the effort of learning. A quick survey of introductory course books indicates that their syllabus content provides poor short term return for someone with limited time to invest. There is usually too much material in the early lessons that is not relevant to immediate needs. The first chapters often deal with topics like the indefinite article, pronouns, or adjectives, before coming to something that can be immediately used [3]. Nation and Crabbe have developed a study plan for short-term stays (1–3 months). They argue that it is worthwhile to learn the local language even during this period, but that intensive courses are ineffective in this case. They selected topics for the curriculum based on four criteria: 1. needs (they conducted a needs analysis of ten respondents), 2. frequency of occurrence of terms (they compared these with An English-French-German-Spanish Word Frequency Dictionary by Helen Eaton, 1940), 3. coverage and combinability, and 4. learnability.

No consideration has been given to special needs that the visitor may have as a result of the particular reason for visiting that country, such as to do academic research, to arrange a trade deal, or to get married. Rather, attention has been focused on survival, travel and social needs which would be common to any visitor to another country. This includes getting the necessities at a good price and basic social courtesies. The syllabus thus has two focuses: a focus on spoken language, on the assumption that in the mainstream tourist areas of a country, communication will be in a spoken form, and a focus on vocabulary [3].

In 2005, researchers from the University of Málaga published a paper that expanded on the original ideas of Nation and Crabb. They transformed the original thematic model into a functional-conceptual one, which is considered more versatile: A functional-notional syllabus was implemented so that it could better suit our students' needs by taking into account particular features such as age, mother tongue, language level, background knowledge, etc. This model, with few adaptations, was designed to cope with the linguistic problems that the students usually have in their first visit to an English-speaking country. Our syllabus was developed with the following objectives in mind: 1) to remedy our students' shortcomings by means of a survival model; 2) to check the validity of a functional-notional approach for this type of course; 3) to assess the students' motivation and acceptance of our model by incorporating computer-based sessions in the language lab. All in all, our model of survival English syllabus is featured by its versatility, as it may be adopted in any teaching environment, and its coverage and scope, as it enables the students to cope with most situations in ordinary life [4].

The survival approach is essentially pragmatic and deliberately limits the breadth of the curriculum in favor of practicality. Closely related to this is the concept of formulaic speech (henceforth FS), which is used in the survival approach. FS is based on sequences of words that speakers learn and use as unified "chunks" without necessarily understanding their internal grammatical structure: A formulaic form is learned in terms of its function. In FS, function has precedence over form, it is more relevant to consider formulas from a pragmatic point of view rather than from a syntactic one. In a Second Language Acquisition perspective, FS is shown as being a temporary stage of acquisition which, among other aspects, enables the speaker to reach idiomaticity in his or her L2 and thereby efficient communication with native speakers [5].

The survival approach is not the only one that aims to enable complete beginners to achieve a basic level of communicative competence as quickly as possible. We now turn our attention to the Scaffolded Language Emergence approach.

2.4 Scaffolded Language Emergence



Shopping	15	17	10	9	10	12	16	18	107
Restaurants, bars	11	3	4	3	3	9	9	13	55
Interactions in public, with friends, in school	1	2	1	2	2	5	3	7	23
Services, leisure time	4	1	1	0	2	0	2	3	13
Accommodation	1	2	3	1	1	2	2	1	13
Transport and navigation	4	1	0	2	1	0	1	3	12

Table 3. Situations in which students miss the most spoken Czech skills.

Situations / Semesters	WS 21/22	SS 21/22	WS 22/23	SS 22/23	WS 23/24	SS 23/24	WS 24/25	WS 25/26	Total
Shopping	18	4		6	2	5	2	3	40
Interactions in public, with friends, in school	4	8	1	5	3	4	6	4	35
Restaurants, bars	6	1		2		1	1	5	16
Accommodation and householding	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	3	14
Transport and navigation	4			2	3		3		12
Services, leisure time	3						2	1	6
Health services	2	1						2	5
Post office	2								2

Table 4. Situations in which students most often miss written Czech skills.

Situations / Semesters	WS 21/22	SS 21/22	WS 22/23	SS 22/23	WS 23/24	SS 23/24	WS 24/25	WS 25/26	Total
Restaurants, bars	4	3		2	2	2	1	2	16
Shopping		2		4	3		2		11
Transport and navigation	3	2	2	1			1		9
E-mails	5			1			1	1	8
Websites (university and others)	3				1		2	1	7
Interactions in public, with friends, in school	3		1	1					5
Accommodation and householding			1	1				1	3
Cooking instructions		2						1	3
Street signs							1	2	3
Services, leisure time	1	1							2
Facebook events	1								1

3.3 Analysis of the Communication Needs of International Students



The purpose was to determine in which communication situations students most often need knowledge of the Czech language. Question 1 addresses this objective. Question 2a was included to determine whether there are, even if rare, situations in which knowledge of Czech is absolutely essential for students. For many students, the answers to Question 1 and Question 2a differ; for many others, the answers to both questions are the same; and some students responded that they did not understand the question. We received the fewest responses to Question 2b, and some students also stated they did not understand the question.

An analysis of all responses to both questions clearly shows that students need the most knowledge of Czech in the following areas: shopping, restaurants and bars, interactions in public spaces, including interactions with friends and at school, transportation and city orientation, accommodation and householding, and services and leisure. In the responses to Question 1: In what situations do students most often use Czech, and Question 2a) In what situations did students most lack knowledge of spoken Czech, the same topics appeared in the top three spots (in varying order): shopping, restaurants and bars, and interactions in public spaces, with friends, and at school. This result confirms that these topics are essential in spoken language for students. In the responses to question 2b) "In what situations did students most lack knowledge of written Czech?", the topic of transportation and city orientation appeared in third place, alongside shopping, restaurants, and bars. The topic of transportation and navigating the city ranks fourth in the overall ranking of all responses to all questions, so it is also very important. This is followed by the topics of accommodation and householding, and services and leisure. Given that our study focuses on students (who have secured housing) rather than travelers, and that in today's age of modern technology, the need to ask for directions has receded into the background, we can conclude that our findings largely confirm the results presented in the 1991 study by Paul Nation and David Crabbe, who identified the following most common communication situations: 1. Greetings and being polite, 2. Buying and bargaining, 3. Reading signs, 4. Getting to places, 5. Finding accommodation, 6. Ordering food, 7. Talking about yourself and talking to children, 8. Controlling and learning language [3].

3.4 Choosing Appropriate Teaching Methods and Strategies

Most international students come to our university for one semester. The semester lasts 13 weeks. Czech language courses for Erasmus+ students are held twice a week for 90 minutes. Teaching methods and approaches should be chosen that enable students to communicate effectively in the most common everyday situations in a Czech-speaking environment within a short time. As explained above, these needs are met by the Survival and Scaffolded Learning approaches. In our Czech language courses for Erasmus+ students, we use a combination of both approaches, incorporating elements of other methods.

Over the years, we have gradually refined our teaching methods and the selection of specific activities based on our observations of how well the approaches and activities used in the courses worked, as well as on more spontaneous student feedback. The selection of topics reflects our ongoing evaluation of the questionnaires mentioned above. We therefore consider shopping, dining situations in restaurants, and greetings, introductions, and basic interactions in public places and with friends to be the most essential communication situations for our students.

Unfortunately, in our setting, we do not have two native speakers in our courses, as described in the SLE approach, so for introductory conversations, we either use video materials or have one instructor outline the situation. In some cases, it is possible to conduct a conversation with one of the more advanced students, typically those from Slavic-speaking countries. At least during the first two sessions, we do not use any written language materials. This approach, which promotes correct pronunciation and is used in SLE, has proven very effective for us in other language courses as well, such as French courses for absolute beginners. Students rely on their auditory memory, which is constantly stimulated in class by new but regularly recurring stimuli. However, we combine the audio track with gestures, movement, and other elements to engage as many senses as possible. We strive to adhere to the principle of using only the target language and to make the most of real-life objects and situations, as well as role-playing exercises. Each lesson concludes with an activity or game that allows students to apply what they have learned actively. As for declension, the main focus is on students' understanding of its meaning and function. During the course, attention is given only to the accusative case, which is used when shopping and ordering at a restaurant. For review and practice at home, we prepare a range of online activities for students in the Wordwall app, such as memory games where they match an image with a sound, and later with a written word; moving words to practice correct sentence structure; selecting the correct forms; sorting words; and so on.



Presenting the specific activities for each topic over the entire semester would be an ambitious goal that would go far beyond the scope of this article; therefore, we will provide a detailed overview of the very first lesson.

3.5 First Learning Unit - Detailed Description

We naturally introduce the "Greetings and Introductions" communication unit right at the first meeting with the students. The teacher greets the students and introduces themselves in a very simple way, using a set phrase: "*Ahoj, já jsem + name*" (Hello, my name is + name), accompanying the introduction with gestures. Then the teacher invites the students to come up, introduces themselves again, and asks, "*A Ty? Jak se jmenuješ?*" (And you? What's your name?) This question corresponds to the informal speech that students will use more frequently. Everything is accompanied by precise gestures and a distinct intonation. The teacher observes which students have understood the question, turns to them, and uses the previously employed gestures for introductions to prompt their responses. When the student responds, the teacher adds the reaction: "*Těší mě.*" (Nice to meet you), again accompanied by a gesture. In this way, all students introduce themselves. Once all students understand this situation and can introduce themselves informally, the teacher explains, using gestures, that this way of speaking is informal, but that Czech also uses a formal style. Then the teacher uses the same gestures for greeting and introducing oneself, but this time accompanies them with formal language: "*Dobrý den. Já jsem + name. A Vy? Jak se jmenujete?*" (Good morning. My name is + name. And you? What is your name?) Students generally understand the difference very well. The teacher then addresses the students in both a formal and informal manner. During the exercise, the teacher suddenly says clearly: "*Promiň, nerozumím. Ještě jednou, prosím.*" (Sorry, I don't understand. One more time, please.) The teacher again accompanies the speech with gestures. If the students do not understand, the teacher repeats the question and adds the previous question: "*Jak se jmenuješ?*" (What is your name?) Once all students understand the content, the teacher also uses the formal form: "*Promiňte, nerozumím. Ještě jednou, prosím.*" (Excuse me, I don't understand. One more time, please.) The teacher then addresses the students in both formal and informal ways, and they complete the micro-dialogue in the same tone, depending on the form the teacher has chosen. After practicing both formal and informal ways of introducing oneself, during which all the students' names were mentioned repeatedly, the teacher surprises the students with a sentence accompanied by a gesture: "*To je + name of student.*" (That's + student's name.) In this way, the teacher introduces several students and then asks: "*To je + student's name?*" (Is this + student's name?) The teacher answers: "*Ano, to je + student's name.*" (Yes, this is + student's name), thereby showing the students the affirmative response. The answer is again accompanied by a gesture. After several repetitions, the teacher explains the negative form in the same way (*No, this is not + student's name*). The final question in this first part of the lesson is: "*Kdo je to?*" (Who is this?) The teacher points to a student, asks the question, and gestures to indicate they don't know who it is. After a brief practice session and summary, students are invited to an Erasmus+ student party where only Czech is spoken. There, they can now get to know each other in Czech, simply ask who someone else is, introduce someone, or say that they don't understand and need the other person to repeat what was just said. Students are repeatedly encouraged to use the gestures they have learned to accompany the corresponding utterances.

In the second part of the first lesson, the teacher will introduce students to several basic concepts from everyday life, specifically a book, a notebook, a pen, a table, a chair, a window, and a door. As mentioned above, Czech uses seven cases; the goal of this section is not only to teach students the words in their basic form but also to familiarize them with the fact that every noun has multiple forms. To do this, the teacher will use specific objects, showing them to the students in various situations and commenting on these situations: "*To je kniha. Kniha je malá. Otevřu knihu. Zavřu knihu. Položím knihu na stůl. Teď je kniha na stole. Je to moje kniha.*" (This is a book. The book is small. I'll open the book. I'll close the book. I'll put the book on the table. Now the book is on the table. This is my book.) At the end, the teacher asks: "*Co je to?*" (What is this?) The students usually answer correctly: "*To je kniha.*" (This is a book.) In this way, the teacher introduces all the objects. At the end of each demonstration, the teacher asks: "*Co je to?*" (What is this?) and, after hearing the correct answer, uses the same question to review the entire series of already familiar objects. This is followed by a review of negation, after which the teacher invites the students to follow their instructions and manipulate the objects whose names they have just learned. During the demonstration, verbs associated with multiple objects (open/close a book, a notebook, a window, a door) were intentionally used so that students could generally understand. This activity is very well received by the students, who are generally motivated by the realization that they understand the instructions in Czech. Next is an activity in which students keep



their eyes closed and identify and name objects based on the sounds they make. The final activity is a conversation in which we simulate a meeting between Erasmus+ students and Czech students. Students try to apply everything they have learned during the lesson. In 90 minutes, they learned how to: greet others and introduce themselves (formally and informally), ask someone's name, say they don't understand, ask for something to be repeated, and name basic everyday objects. They know that in Czech we use formal and informal forms of address, as well as declension; they have mastered the third-person singular form of the verb "to be," which is irregular and often causes problems; and they understand the difference between the pronouns "co" and "kdo."

4. Conclusion

For international students who come to the Czech Republic for one or two semesters as part of the Erasmus+ program, the Czech language poses a significant challenge. Given that, outside major tourist centers, communicating in English in everyday situations remains difficult, it is crucial to equip students quickly with a functional foundation in the language. An analysis of communication needs conducted among 163 respondents clearly identified shopping, visits to restaurants and bars, and basic social interaction in public and school settings as priority areas. These real-life needs of students largely align with the themes identified by Paul Nation and David Crabbe as early as 1991. A combination of the "Survival Approach" and the "Scaffolded Language Emergence" (SLE) approach proved highly effective for this specific group of students within the limited time frame (a 13-week semester with two 90-minute classes per week). Teaching based on fixed phrases (chunks) allows students to achieve immediate communicative success, which significantly boosts their willingness to communicate (WTC) in real-life situations. Furthermore, the SLE approach effectively addresses a common problem in international courses, namely excessive reliance on a bridge language (typically English). Thanks to its emphasis on multisensory learning, gestures, facial expressions, and the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, this model eliminates the need for translation and promotes the natural "emergence" of language structures through physical experience. The practical application in the first teaching unit demonstrated that even complete beginners can master the basics of social etiquette and name several objects in the target language within 90 minutes. The proposed strategy thus represents a viable alternative to traditional grammar-centric methods and provides students with tools for effective integration into the Czech sociocultural environment.

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