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# The Role of Learning Activities in Shaping Emotional Responses of U.S. Study Abroad Students in Learning Czech

Silvie Převrátlová<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract in English

Although study abroad is an established research context for second language acquisition, the emotional experiences of U.S. students learning less commonly taught languages, such as Czech, require further research, particularly in settings where these languages lie outside students' primary academic pursuits. This study explores U.S. students' emotional responses to learning Czech, focusing on specific activities that catalyze emotions. Through qualitative analysis of 36 written reflections and group interviews with 18 participants, this research identifies three primary emotional trajectories: excitement to disappointment, anxiety to comfort, and stable emotional equilibrium. The findings highlight the significant role of group/pair work, interactive activities, and immersion in fostering positive emotional experiences and suggest the need for pedagogical strategies that support emotional well-being in study abroad language learning. The study contributes to understanding emotional dynamics in acquiring less-commonly taught languages by native English speakers during study abroad.

## Abstract in Spanish

Aunque el aprendizaje en el extranjero es un contexto de investigación consolidado en el aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, las experiencias emocionales de los estudiantes estadounidenses que aprenden idiomas menos

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comúnmente enseñados, como el checo, requieren una mayor exploración, especialmente en entornos donde estos idiomas no forman parte central de sus estudios académicos. Este estudio examina las respuestas emocionales de estudiantes estadounidenses al aprendizaje del checo, centrándose en actividades específicas que desencadenan emociones. A través de un análisis cualitativo de 36 reflexiones escritas y entrevistas grupales con 18 participantes, la investigación identifica tres trayectorias emocionales principales: de entusiasmo a decepción, de ansiedad a comodidad y un equilibrio emocional estable. Los hallazgos resaltan el papel fundamental del trabajo en grupo/pareja, las actividades interactivas y la inmersión en la generación de experiencias emocionales positivas, sugiriendo la necesidad de estrategias pedagógicas que apoyen el bienestar emocional en el aprendizaje de idiomas en el extranjero. Este estudio contribuye a la comprensión de las dinámicas emocionales en el aprendizaje de idiomas menos comúnmente enseñados por hablantes nativos de inglés durante su estancia en el extranjero.

## **Abstract in Czech**

Přestože je studium v zahraničí zavedeným výzkumným kontextem pro osvojování druhého jazyka, zkušenosti studentů, kteří se učí méně obvyklé jazyky, jako je čeština, vyžadují bližší zkoumání, a to zejména v prostředí, kde tyto jazyky nespádají do primárního akademického zaměření studentů. Tato studie se zaměřuje na emocionální reakce amerických studentů na studium češtiny a na konkrétní učební činnosti, jež ovlivnily emoce studujících. Data byla sbírána v 36 písemných reflexích a skupinových rozhovorech s 18 účastníky. Analýza dat ukázala tři základní emoční trajektorie: od nadšení ke zklamání, od úzkosti k pohodě a stabilní úroveň emocí. Výsledky zdůrazňují význam práce ve skupině či dvojicích, roli interaktivních a imerzních aktivit. Studie dále upozorňuje na potřebu pedagogických strategií, které podporují emoční pohodu při výuce jazyků. Tento výzkum přispívá k pochopení emoční dynamiky při osvojování méně obvyklých jazyků rodilými mluvčími angličtiny ve studijních programech v zahraničí.

## **Keywords**

Czech as a second language; gamification; group work; LOTEs; motivation; pair work; study abroad

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## **1. Introduction**

In the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a sharp decline in study abroad (SA) enrollments, there has been an increase in the

popularity of such programs. Traditional destinations like Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and France continue to be favored by U.S. students who aim to study in Europe. However, there is a growing trend of students venturing beyond these choices, with the Czech Republic ranking 25th in popularity among U.S. study abroad destinations (Baer, 2023; Open Doors, 2023).

From the early studies documenting the impact on language proficiency dating back to the 1960s (Carrol, 1967), SA research has expanded beyond the scope of linguistic achievement to explore various facets, including identity (Benson et al., 2013; Kinginger, 2004, 2011, 2013), learner beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017), or motivation (Hang-Il, 2020; Pawlak et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2022). A significant amount of research has been conducted on widely spoken languages, such as French (Allen, 2010; Allen & Herron, 2003; Kinginger, 2008; Kinginger & Carnine, 2019), Spanish (Hernández, 2010; Isabelli-García, 2006), German (Müller, 2023), or Russian (Davidson, 2010; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017) and there remains a considerable gap concerning less-commonly taught languages. This gap is notable for students who learn these languages outside their main field of study.

The global dominance of English presents additional motivational barriers for English-speaking students learning foreign languages (Thompson, 2021; Ushioda, 2017). Moreover, as the field of second language acquisition increasingly embraces positive psychology and the 'affective turn' (Prior, 2019; Richards, 2022), shifting from a predominant focus on language anxiety to investigating positive emotional states like language enjoyment (Dewaele, 2022; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014), the exploration of emotional experiences in language learning becomes even more pertinent.

In response to these needs, this study aims to bridge the existing research gap by examining the emotional experiences of English-speaking students learning Czech in the SA context. This research explores how emotions influence language learning and identifies pedagogical practices that enhance emotional well-being and linguistic development.

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do U.S. students emotionally respond to learning Czech during their study abroad experiences in the Czech Republic? (2) What specific emotional challenges and positive experiences emerge in the Czech language learning journey? (3) Which activities and assignments within the Czech language course evoke significant emotional responses among participants?

Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of the L2 motivational self-system, focusing mainly on the L2 learning experience, this study investigates emotions, motivation, and language learning, incorporating perspectives from research on foreign language anxiety and enjoyment.

## **2. Context of the Study**

A notable portion of the Czech Republic's youth has achieved proficiency in English. Nevertheless, most of the population still prefers or defaults to speaking Czech. Less than 30% of Czechs report being able to converse in English (European Commission, 2012), which presents a linguistic challenge for international students and can hinder their cultural integration. Furthermore, while homestays offer valuable immersive opportunities that foster deeper cultural and linguistic engagement (Kinging & Carnine, 2019), participants in this program reside in apartments with other U.S. students, spending most of their time with fellow program participants. This arrangement limits meaningful interaction with the local community (Kinging, 2008).

Therefore, the SA program under examination incorporates a mandatory Czech language course to address the need for opportunities to integrate into the local culture. Students know that taking Czech is a compulsory component of the program, and the Czech language courses elicit a range of emotional responses, from eager anticipation to anxiety (Převrátilová, 2019, 2024). The compulsory nature of these courses can have dual effects: while it can boost linguistic confidence and a sense of accomplishment for some students, it may also trigger anxiety or demotivation in others, particularly if perceived merely as a requirement of the program (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 148).

## **3. Emotions and Motivation in Language Learning**

The educational process intertwines a range of affective factors, such as emotions, attitudes, and motivation, with the development of linguistic proficiency (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 36). Stern (1983) suggests that emotional influences may be as important as cognitive abilities in determining language learning success, highlighting the complex relationship between affect and motivation in language learning. Motivation is a crucial predictor of success in language learning (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003) and has been the focus of extensive

research for several decades, dating back to the 1960s when Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model offered a comprehensive view of language learning motivation. This model incorporates the effort learners invest in achieving their language goals and the desire to master the target language, as well as their emotional responses to the learning process. Gardner's framework assesses motivation through various scales that capture cognitive and affective dimensions. For example, the integrativeness scale reflects the learner's willingness to engage with and integrate into the target language culture. Attitudes toward the L2 community measure the learner's sense of belonging within the community of target language speakers, and, lastly, attitudes toward the learning situation evaluate how learners emotionally and cognitively perceive their language environment, including their views on teachers, course materials, and the overall learning experience. Gardner (1985) integrated anxiety into his broader exploration of attitudes and motivation.

In response to a call to link motivation more closely to classroom pedagogy (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991), Dörnyei (1994) proposed a conceptual framework encompassing three dimensions: the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level. The language level embraces attitudes toward the target language community and its cultural values. The learner level focuses on individual differences among language learners, including personality traits, self-confidence, and prior experiences. Finally, the learning-situation level refers to the educational environment, including classroom dynamics, pedagogical approaches, and the role of teachers.

The teacher's role is especially critical in shaping the learning situation, as emotional experiences link closely to how teachers manage the classroom and interact with students. Dewaele and Dewaele (2020) emphasize that classroom dynamics, pedagogical methodologies, and teacher-student interactions significantly influence learners' affective states. Learners' enjoyment relates to the teacher's ability to create engaging and supportive learning environments. Teachers who foster positive emotional climates enhance motivation and emotional well-being, which, in turn, supports more effective language acquisition.

In the process-oriented approach, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) highlighted the dynamic nature of motivation and proposed three distinct stages in formal language instruction: the pre-actional stage, where learners set goals and form initial motivation; the actional stage, where motivation is maintained or

diminished depending on classroom activities and experiences; and the post-actional stage, where learners reflect on their achievements and outcomes and shape their future attitudes toward language learning. This dynamic model emphasizes how motivation shifts in response to educational contexts, making it particularly relevant for examining motivational trajectories.

Building on previous motivational theories, Dörnyei (2005) sought to synthesize second language acquisition research with contemporary psychology and developed the L2 Motivational Self-System (L2MSS, Dörnyei, 2009), grounded in the possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). Possible selves refer to an individual's envisioned images of "what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming," serving as a conceptual link between cognition and motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The motivating force in the L2MSS arises from the perceived gap between an individual's current self and their ideal future self, as well as their desire to bridge this gap. At its core, the L2MSS consists of three principal components: the ideal L2 self, representing the individual's aspirations and vision of what they hope to achieve as an L2 user; the ought-to L2 self, encompassing the traits an individual believes they should possess to meet external expectations and avoid adverse outcomes (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 86); and the L2 learning experience, which derives motivation from past language learning experiences and the present learning context, including factors such as the influence of the teacher, course content, or classroom activities.

Emotions play a crucial role in motivating language learners (MacIntyre et al., 2019). However, for several decades, second language acquisition research primarily focused on negative emotions, mainly foreign language anxiety, characterized by apprehension about various aspects of language learning and use (Horwitz, 1985, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986). The affective turn in applied linguistics, influenced by positive psychology, has since broadened the scope of research to include how positive emotional experiences facilitate language learning (Williams et al., 2015), leading to the introduction of the concept of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Furthermore, recent studies on boredom in language learning and the development of the Foreign Language Learning Boredom Scale (FLLBS) enrich the comprehension of the affective landscape in language education (Li et al., 2023; Li & Wei, 2023).

While much of the research in language learning has predominantly focused on English, studies suggest that learners of LOTE experience different motivational dynamics (Oakes & Howard, 2022). Dewaele and Saito (2024) highlighted that LOTE learners reported significantly more enjoyment but similar anxiety levels compared to those studying English. This finding suggests that enjoyment and motivation, while related, represent distinct aspects of the language learning experience.

#### **4. Study Abroad, Motivation, and Emotions**

Since the early studies on the relationship between SA experiences and language competence (Carroll, 1969; Freed, 1995), research has consistently confirmed the positive link between the two (Isabelli-García et al., 2018). Motivation in the SA context has been examined as a dynamic and evolving process (Fryer & Roger, 2018; Du & Jackson, 2021; Wang, 2023). For example, Wang's (2023) study focused on the underexplored case of Chinese undergraduates learning Bulgarian during their time in Bulgaria. This research identified three distinct motivational trajectories over a year: declining motivation accompanied by a weakened ideal Bulgarian self, fluctuating motivation with a weakened ideal Bulgarian self, and fluctuating motivation with a strengthened ideal Bulgarian self. The study highlighted the crucial role of learners' interpretations of their experiences abroad.

Drawing on research into motivational trajectories and the fluctuating ideal L2 self, my recent study (Převrátilová, 2024) examined U.S. students enrolled in a semester-long SA program in the Czech Republic, where the target language (Czech) was unrelated to their academic or professional goals. This qualitative study traced changes in students' motivation over the course of the semester. While the findings revealed an overall increase in motivation, they also indicated a decline in the ideal Czech self by the end of the course. These motivational shifts reveal how SA experiences can simultaneously foster engagement while weakening long-term identification with the target language, especially when the language holds limited personal relevance.

Studying abroad is a transformative experience (Leaver & Campbell, 2023) that provides opportunities for linguistic improvements, cultural development, and personal growth. Savicki (2013) underscored the potential of students' emotional challenges during SA that can lead to positive outcomes and appreciation of cultural diversity. Furthermore, Johnson (2020) explored how

learners can mobilize their emotional experiences toward language proficiency development. Similarly, Kim (2022) traced the journey of a Chinese student at a U.S. university and illustrated how emotional experiences mapped onto the student's socialization process. The study further emphasized how affect shapes language engagement, showing that reframing emotional struggles as an investment allowed the student to develop a multilingual identity. The study also underscored the importance of reflection on emotionally loaded experiences and suggested that reflective practices can lay a foundation for meaningful participation in new linguistic and social communities.

## **5. The Study**

### **5.1. Participants**

This research took place in a university SA program in Prague, focusing on the experiences of U.S. students enrolled in five simultaneous one-semester-long Elementary Czech language courses. Each course involved eleven to thirteen students, with a planned schedule of ninety-minute sessions held twice a week over thirteen weeks. The program commenced with an intensive introductory session that spanned three hours daily across four days. Three teachers, each with several years of experience teaching in the program, facilitated the instruction for these courses and were based in local institutions. One of the teachers also assumed a dual role as a researcher and an instructor for two courses.

The sample consisted of 36 participants who voluntarily submitted written reflections, of which 18 also participated in the final interviews. All participants were third-year (junior) undergraduate students aged between 18 and 25 years from various U.S. universities. The researcher had limited insight into the students' SA preparation before arriving in Prague.

They all spoke English as their first language, with varied proficiency levels in one or more additional languages. The participants reported primarily learning Spanish at the college level, with some also having studied French, Mandarin, German, Italian, or Hebrew, though exact proficiency levels were not assessed. While most participants had learned a second language, they did not report on their third-language proficiency. None had prior experience with the Czech language at the start of the study.

## 5.2. Data Collection

The study adopted a dual-strategy approach for data collection to capture the full spectrum of students' language learning experiences during their SA program in the Czech Republic, from the program's start to its conclusion. This approach combined early-stage reflections with end-of-program interviews to provide initial insights into students' immediate responses and longer-term reflections on their emotional and cognitive journeys.

The study focused on reflections during the first week for two reasons. First, emotional intensity levels are often high at the beginning of the language learning process, which makes this period particularly insightful for understanding early emotional responses (Převrátilová, 2019). Secondly, the study involved three teachers, and collecting data in the first week only reduced the burden on participants and instructors. The process remained manageable and did not disrupt the course structure.

To counterbalance the absence of continuous reflection data, the semi-structured interviews with a subset of volunteers at the end of the program provided an opportunity to explore students' emotional and cognitive reflections and trace how their feelings evolved over the semester. The combination of early reflections with end-of-program interviews aimed to explore the key emotional aspects of the learning process.

At the onset of each semester, students received a sheet with a prompt to guide their reflections on their learning experiences during the first week of the intensive Czech courses: *Emotions play an important role in learning a foreign language. How are you feeling now? What makes you feel that way? Please note anything that relates to the way you feel about learning Czech.* Students had a few minutes to reflect on their experiences, emotions, and reactions at the end of each daily session during the initial four-day intensive period. On the fourth day, teachers invited the students to submit all their written reflections if they wished to participate in the study. Thirty-six responses were returned, each covering reflections from Days 1 through Day 4.

In the concluding data collection phase, the study employed voluntary semi-structured group interviews in the final week of class to gather additional insights on the evolution of emotional responses. All students could participate in the interviews, with extra credit for the Czech course provided as an external motivator. The teachers also highlighted that non-participation would not affect

their grades. This approach helped counterbalance the concern that only highly motivated or interested students would opt into the interviews. Eighteen students took part in these discussions. Ten had the researcher as their teacher, while the remaining eight participants belonged to the other teachers' groups.

Three group interviews and one individual online interview were conducted. Each involved a different group of participants. In total, these interviews lasted 147 minutes.

The first and second group interviews included six students each, and the third group comprised five students. Each group was distinct and captured various perspectives and experiences across the sessions. The sessions followed a structured approach. The researcher first presented open-ended questions about the student's language learning experiences. They explored motivation and attitudes toward languages, challenges faced during the process, memorable moments in learning Czech, and the use of Czech. The researcher also inquired about the specific activities that catalyzed emotions in the Czech class. After each question, participants had a moment to reflect individually and write their thoughts and answers on paper. Next, students worked in small groups, sharing their responses and reacting to each other's reflections. This stage encouraged peer-to-peer interaction, allowing participants to engage with different perspectives and compare their experiences. Finally, the discussion returned to the whole group, where the participants discussed the themes that had emerged in their small group conversations. The collaborative process helped ensure that the interview captured more than individual perspectives and fostered group dynamics, raising broader, collective insights about the learning experience.

Before participation, the researcher explained the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the measures implemented to safeguard their data. Participants signed the informed consent form.

### 5.3. Data Analysis

Data collection yielded two distinct datasets: reflections submitted by students during the first week and final interview transcripts collected at the end of the program. The data from each stage were analyzed separately, distinguishing between early-stage emotional responses and later reflections on the overall learning experience. Numerical labels (1-36) were assigned to participants in the first stage, and alphabetical labels (A-Q) to those in the final

interview phase to maintain clarity in data presentation. This labeling system ensured organizational consistency, though it did not allow tracing individual emotional patterns across the two stages.

The data analysis followed a deductive and iterative approach. Initial codes stemmed from existing theoretical frameworks of L2 language learning experience, motivation, and emotions, and the subsequent inductive coding allowed for the emergence of themes rooted in participants' experiences, such as adaptation to cultural environments, fatigue, or the impact of immersive activities.

## **6. Results**

### **6.1. Initial Emotional Responses**

Students responded with various emotional responses at the outset of the Czech language class. These responses were categorized into three broad types: positive, negative, or mixed, illustrating the diverse attitudes.

Eight of the 36 participants exhibited positive attitudes. They characterized their approach to language learning with enthusiasm and optimism about the prospect of learning a new language. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

I am feeling excited to learn Czech right now [...] and I feel that way because I enjoy learning new languages and I think it'll make my experience in Prague better (Participant 16),

I am excited to learn new words in a new language that will help me adapt to my environment (Participant 20),

I am glad to be learning Czech. I think it would be wrong to come here for 3 months and not try to learn (Participant 7).

The opportunity to interact with locals, which students saw as a way to deepen their cultural understanding and enhance their SA experience, emerged as a common theme.

Nevertheless, an equal number of students expressed negative emotions, such as apprehension or reluctance toward this linguistic venture. The roots of these negative feelings often stemmed from their past learning experiences, the typological complexity of Czech compared to languages they were familiar with, and its reputation as a complex language to master. Several participants voiced

concerns about language aptitude and the challenge of Czech. For example, Participant 24 said, “Czech seems very difficult to pick up. I am nervous. I am not good at learning languages.” Participant 11 added, “My biggest point of anxiety came from knowing nothing about the language and only having a basic knowledge that this is one of the hardest languages to learn.”

The perceived difficulty of the Czech language, alongside past negative experiences with language learning, evoked apprehension, particularly palpable among students who expressed concerns about fears of not meeting expectations.

Twenty participants (55%) initially reported mixed emotions, experiencing both enthusiasm and anxiety about learning Czech, as Participant 13 summarized: “I feel a lot of different emotions, I am excited, nervous, anxious, curious, hoping for the best.”

As the first week of the course progressed, their emotional landscape started to transform. The initial feelings of uncertainty and intimidation started to dissolve, and adaptation and growing confidence emerged. This change was attributed to becoming more acquainted with the course content and an improved sense of linguistic self-assurance.

By the second week, the anticipation of quizzes and assessments had introduced a layer of testing anxiety for many. However, the reception of quiz results turned this apprehension into satisfaction and renewed eagerness for the language learning journey. Participant 4 demonstrated a notable emotional progression throughout the first week. Before the class began, they admitted, “I feel nervous, I want to learn but I’m worried I’ll be bad at it.” After the first day they reflected, “I feel overwhelmed, but less so.” By the third day, they shared, “I feel less scared but I don’t feel confident about my ability to retain everything.” By the final day, their confidence had grown, stating, “I feel more confident about my ability to learn Czech.” Despite maintaining caution, this participant’s confidence improved considerably by the end of the week. This trajectory of emotional adaptation highlighted the role of increased language familiarity in fostering positive shifts in student attitudes.

Similarly, other participants experienced emotional shifts, reflecting the dynamic relationship between initial apprehension and eventual confidence throughout the first week of class. Another illustrative reflection came from Participant 25, who noted, “I am very much enjoying this class: before last week,

I was nervous, but this is a great environment, and I feel more comfortable [...] I feel more confident after each class.”

The transition from initial apprehension to a more confident engagement with the Czech language showcases the dynamic nature of students' emotional responses and highlights the role of conducive learning environment in enhancing student comfort and confidence throughout the intensive course. The growing confidence related to several factors. First, enhanced exposure to Czech—the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation—gradually eased students into the language and fostered a more fluent and comfortable usage. Next, a deeper understanding of the language and cultural elements empowered students to engage more actively in and out of class and further boosted their confidence. Additionally, the students named specific activities that helped them feel safe in the class, mainly working in pairs and small groups, that diminished their language learning anxiety. These activities will be discussed further below.

The first week's reflections revealed that while initial emotions toward learning Czech varied widely, from excitement and optimism through a mixture of emotions to feelings of anxiety and nervousness, the trajectory for most was toward increased confidence and comfort. This evolution highlights how instructional strategies facilitate positive shifts and demonstrate the dynamic nature of emotional responses at the beginning of the language learning process.

## 6.2. Emotional Trajectories

Although tracking individual emotional trajectories over time was impossible due to the study design, it allowed for identifying generalized emotional patterns at each stage. The main limitation was that initial reflections were collected anonymously, while final interviews were conducted individually. Matching participants across these two phases would have required breaking anonymity. Additionally, given the study's focus on broader emotional patterns rather than individual developmental paths, analyzing the two data sources separately provided a meaningful perspective on general trends.

The data revealed three primary patterns that characterize the emotional journey of learners studying Czech. The first trajectory led from excitement to disappointment. Initially, learners embarked on their language-learning adventure with high levels of enthusiasm. However, as the course

progressed, participants encountered various challenges that led to moments of frustration and stress. Participant Q summarized the transition as “a dramatic drop from the start to the end,” where the initial allure of learning a new language waned and left practical communication as the remaining motivator. Similarly, Participant O shared, “I was a lot more excited at the beginning to learn it. And then, as it went on, I had to focus on other classes, and it became more difficult to stay excited about learning Czech.” This statement reflects how external academic pressures gradually diminished the initial excitement for language learning.

The second trajectory moved from anxiety to comfort and then, in some cases, returned to unease again. Several participants entered the course anxious about Czech's reputed difficulty, as illustrated in the initial reflections from the first week. This anxiety was often rooted in previous language learning experiences (Horwitz, 1985) and a perceived inadequacy in linguistic self-confidence (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 35). Over time, acclimation to the language learning environment led to comfort, as Participant D illustrated,

When I first got here, literally the first week, I had such a negative view of Czech as a language. I was just so many consonants! Why do we have to learn this? Literally, one country speaks it. [...] And then as the semester went on, I just definitely came around and thought it was way more interesting as it went on. I think eating Czech food helped just experiencing everything in Prague. That field trip to get lunch was very cool for me. It completely turned my view around.

Nevertheless, this newfound ease was challenged by the academic pressures of other courses the students were taking in the SA program, as illustrated by Participant O above.

The third trajectory, typical for but not limited to learners with successful prior language learning experience, involved maintaining a stable emotional state throughout, undisturbed by significant fluctuations, as Participant A, who had a background in several languages, including Russian, summarized, “I think I always understood why we were doing certain exercises or activities, and it made sense to me throughout. I didn't feel lost or overwhelmed like some others. I stayed comfortable and confident during the lessons.” Then they added, “I had a positive attitude, particularly to Czech as well, because I think the cultural and social aspect of it was definitely a big thing.”

This consistency suggests that previous success in language learning equips individuals with strategies and mindsets conducive to emotional resilience and adaptability.

Despite the varied emotional paths, nearly all participants concluded their journey with gratitude, acknowledging the enrichment from learning Czech to their SA experience. The emotional trajectories illustrate the complex experiences of language learners and emphasize the critical role of instructional strategies and program design in navigating and supporting these emotional journeys.

### 6.3. Emotional Impact of Activities

In exploring the emotional landscape of students learning Czech, distinct challenges and triumphs became evident. While a cohort of participants consistently exhibited enthusiasm and motivation, a contrasting group encountered significant emotional hurdles. These students faced apprehension, frustration, and fatigue, which underscored the demanding aspects of the language acquisition process. The rapid pace of the course proved overwhelming for some. The reflections revealed struggles with the complexities of Czech grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, where pronunciation stood out as the main hurdle in the initial reflection, spontaneously mentioned by 62% of the participants.

Moreover, using Czech in everyday contexts outside the classroom introduced additional challenges. While engaging with native speakers and navigating daily interactions, students often felt intimidated, which highlighted the discrepancies between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The real-world application and engagement, however, also provided valuable learning opportunities. Participant M noted how using Czech at a restaurant was helpful: “When my family came to visit, talking to the waiter in Czech made me feel like I learned something.”

Pedagogical strategies incorporating group and pair work emerged as highly effective in mitigating the emotional challenges of learning Czech. The collaborative formats alleviated the anxiety associated with public speaking and enhanced comfort and security among peers. For instance, Participants O and P discussed with Participant J how working in pairs before engaging with the whole class supported them:

Participant J: [In our class], we would get a paragraph and then we would go around the room and one person would do the first sentence, and the next person would do the next sentence. We didn't know we'd be given it.

Participant O: In our class, we'd read it with a pair and go over it. [...] But there was never a time where you'd feel you had one of those sentences and you didn't know what it meant, I would feel stupid.

Participant J: I would never feel comfortable reading a sentence and being 'I don't know what this means' because [...]it is a little bit discouraging because she would expect you to try, but it's really hard to try to guess words. You have no idea what they were saying. [...]

Participant P: In our class, I feel before we did that, we would go over it a little bit, then split into pairs usually.

This interview extract highlights how in one class, the unfamiliarity of the task led to anxiety in some students. However, in the other class where pair work was a routine part of the coursework, students felt more prepared for speaking in front of their peers. The reflection emphasizes how pair work created a low-stakes environment in which students could navigate uncertainties without fear of judgment. It provided a safe space to practice, clarify misunderstandings, and build confidence before moving to full-class participation.

When reflecting on activities that reduce stress and enhance language learning enjoyment, the data revealed that incorporating interactive games, hands-on tasks, and cultural immersion through field trips significantly enriched the learning process. These activities broke the monotony of traditional lectures, fostering engagement and enjoyment—both crucial for maintaining motivation. Participants also noted that the low-stakes nature of the course encouraged exploration and error-making, which they highly valued for reducing the pressure of academic performance.

Table (1) on the following page summarizes the crucial activities and pedagogical approaches discussed in the data and their impacts on students' emotional and learning experiences, as perceived by the participants.

TABLE (1)

CLASS ACTIVITIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Activity/Pedagogical Approach	Impact on Students
Group and pair work	Enhanced feelings of safety and preparedness; encouraged active participation and collaboration.
Interactive games	Broke the monotony of traditional lectures; facilitated engagement and enjoyment.
Hands-on activities	Supported active learning and maintained motivation.
Kinaesthetic activities	Engaged students in dynamic learning through movement.
Field trips/cultural immersion	Provided real-life contexts for language use; enhanced practical language skills; deepened understanding and appreciation of Czech culture; strengthened connection to the language.
Structured support and guidance (scaffolding)	Built capability and confidence in challenging tasks.
Supportive classroom atmosphere	Encouraged active participation and making mistakes without fear; boosted confidence and motivation.

## 7. Discussion

Language learning is inherently a social process, occurring through collaborative efforts, the negotiation of meaning, and the co-construction of knowledge (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lantolf et al., 2020). The critical role of social interaction in classroom language learning has been well-documented (Pica et al., 1989; Gass & Mackey, 2007), as has the impact of small group activities on speaking skills (Crisianita & Mandasari, 2022). The results of this study further emphasize the significance of pair and group work, with participants identifying pair work as the most effective stress reducer and recognizing its importance in maintaining positive emotional states. Group activities gain increased importance in SA programs. Beyond fostering linguistic collaboration, they also provide essential social support and allow students to share their experiences, navigate cultural adjustment, and reduce feelings of isolation.

In addition to pair and group work, interactive games and collaborative tasks were the second most impactful factor affecting students' emotional responses. Such activities created a safe space for students to practice the language in a low-stakes environment, allowing them to rehearse before applying their knowledge in situations outside of class. The games fostered an enjoyable and relaxed atmosphere, alleviating stress, boosting motivation, and enhancing students' well-being. This aligns with existing literature on

gamification (Dehganzadeh & Dehganzadeh, 2020; Shakhmalova & Zotova, 2023), including higher education contexts (Subhash & Cudney, 2018), which emphasize positive emotional responses to interactive learning and increased language acquisition.

The findings on emotional trajectories align with the "honeymoon effect," documented in cultural studies and language acquisition research (Oberg, 1960). This effect describes the initial surge of enthusiasm and positivity students often experience when they embark on new ventures, such as learning a foreign language during SA. In the present study, U.S. students demonstrated similar early excitement during the first week of intensive Czech language learning. However, as the program progressed, this enthusiasm began to wane. For some students, the end of the course marked a dramatic decline in motivation to continue learning Czech. This finding aligns with Převrátilová (2024), who also observed a decline in the ideal Czech self among students over the course of a semester-long SA program.

Nevertheless, throughout the course, many participants reported a growing sense of accomplishment as they successfully applied their language skills in everyday situations, such as ordering food or navigating public transportation. Authentic interaction emerges as a key factor in sustaining students' enthusiasm and language growth across different study abroad contexts. Siegllová (2008) argued that the lack of opportunities to engage with the local culture through meaningful communication contributes to demotivation among U.S. students learning Czech. She emphasized the critical role of authentic interactions in sustaining motivation and promoting linguistic growth. Similarly, Hernández (2010) and Isabelli-García (2006) agreed that real-life communicative experiences were essential for motivation and language development among SA learners of Spanish.

In contrast to traditional classroom settings, the SA environment introduces additional complexity to the language learning experience. Students are learning a new and challenging language and navigating cultural norms, social subtleties, and real-world applications of the language. When students do not perceive the language as relevant within broader context, their motivation and engagement may diminish, especially if the target language does not directly connect with their primary academic or personal interests.

## **8. Pedagogical Implications**

Studies by Dewaele and Dewaele (2020) and Richards (2022) highlighted the teacher's role in shaping emotional responses to language learning. In the SA environment, the role of the teacher also involves managing students' emotional well-being as they navigate the challenges of cultural and linguistic immersion outside of the classroom. To balance the potential honeymoon effect, educators should build on the process model of motivation (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998) and implement appropriate motivational strategies tailored to the different stages of the language learning journey. Dörnyei (2001) offers a comprehensive overview of motivational classroom strategies applicable in each stage of a language course. He suggests that teachers should first create essential motivational conditions and generate initial motivation, later in the course maintain their students' motivation, and at the end of the program, encourage positive self-evaluation. These strategies can help educators anticipate and prepare for motivational fluctuations among SA students, crucial to sustaining engagement and preventing drops in motivation.

Language programs in SA contexts should help students recognize the relevance of language learning beyond the classroom. Immersive cultural activities provide meaningful opportunities to apply linguistic knowledge in authentic settings and enhance student engagement. This is particularly important for English speakers, who often face inherent motivational challenges when learning foreign languages (Thompson, 2021; Ushioda, 2017), especially when they fail to see the significance of the target language beyond their academic interests or the limited duration of the SA experience.

## **9. Limitations and Future Research**

While providing insightful observations on the emotional trajectories of U.S. study abroad students learning Czech, this study has several limitations. First, the qualitative nature of this research limits the generalizability of the findings. The experiences captured are deeply individualized and context-specific, rooted in the unique cultural and educational setting of the Czech Republic. These insights may not be directly transferable to students learning other languages or in different SA contexts.

Second, the participants provided self-reported data through reflections and interviews. While invaluable for accessing participants' emotional journeys, such data could influence the study's objectivity. The retrospective nature of

these reflections might be affected by participants' current emotional states or biases, potentially skewing the data.

Several avenues for future research emerge. A mixed-methods approach should complement qualitative insights with quantitative data. Additionally, studies examining the emotional experiences of language learners in different cultural and linguistic settings could offer valuable cross-cultural perspectives on the role of emotions in language acquisition. Lastly, future research could focus on developing and testing specific pedagogical interventions designed to address the emotional challenges identified in this study.

## **10. Conclusion**

This study highlights the significant role of emotional factors in language learning, particularly for native English speakers studying a less-commonly-taught language during SA. The findings reveal a broad spectrum of emotions, from initial enthusiasm to potential disillusionment, illustrating how task-specific challenges, instructional methods, and classroom dynamics shape students' emotional experiences abroad.

Moreover, the mandatory nature of these language courses can evoke negative emotional responses, which may diminish students' motivation and hinder their overall learning outcomes if left unaddressed. Therefore, educators and program designers need to incorporate language learning activities that reduce stress, increase emotional well-being, and highlight the relevance of the target language when designing SA curricula, as suggested in this study.

Finally, ensuring students' emotional well-being is essential to the success and sustainability of SA programs, especially in linguistically challenging contexts such as the Czech Republic. As globalization continues to reshape the world, supporting language learning in SA programs becomes increasingly important. Learning local languages enriches the cultural and linguistic diversity of SA experiences and promotes the sustainability of language learning across various contexts. In an increasingly interconnected world, fostering emotional well-being and developing diverse linguistic skills in SA programs are critical for preparing students to thrive in globalized environments.

## Ethical Approval

All participants were informed about the research purpose and provided consent to participate.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

## Data Availability

Participants provided informed consent for their anonymized data to be used in academic research. In line with this consent, anonymized excerpts supporting the findings of this study may be shared with qualified researchers for non-commercial academic purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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