



Should we make them study Czech while they study here? Change of Students' Attitudes towards Learning Czech during Study Abroad

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ABSTRACT:

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study carried out among American students coming to the Czech Republic for one semester within their study abroad programme at Charles University, Prague, taking Elementary Czech Course as a part of their compulsory syllabus. The aim of the study was two-fold: 1) to assess the options such research may bring and 2) to gather some data for the upcoming research to create hypotheses regarding the attitudes and motivation towards learning Czech as a second language. During three consecutive semesters, 174 students participated in filling out questionnaires. The findings have confirmed that the students' attitudes change throughout the semester and they have also shown some factors influencing the initial and final attitudes. The majority of students display rather negative emotions (anxiety) relating to learning Czech at the beginning but at the end most of them express a positive attitude. The findings imply some pedagogic suggestions regarding the syllabus and course design.

KEYWORDS:

anxiety, attitudes, Czech, language learning factors, motivation, study abroad

0. INTRODUCTION

Thousands of foreign students come to study in the Czech Republic within programmes such as European Erasmus+ or US Study Abroad every year¹. Many of them take Czech language classes while studying here, either voluntarily, or as a part of their compulsory syllabus. Students in the Study Abroad programme come from a variety of fields of study² and it is not a rule that they study abroad to improve their language skills. Unlike students who decide to study in a foreign country in order to achieve a higher linguistic competence, many students coming to the Czech Republic only want to learn Czech to enhance the experience while staying here.

Although second language acquisition within the context of study abroad has been studied since the 1960s (Carrol, 1967; Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2008; Allen, 2010; Davidson, 2010), most studies have focused on English or other widely spoken languages and generally, the correlation between studying abroad and language performance has been standing in the lime light. Small languages are rather understudied

1 Source: NAEP http://www.naep.cz/index.php?a=view-project-folderandproject_folder_id=60and, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/US-Study-Abroad/Destinations>

2 <https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/US-Study-Abroad/Fields-of-Study>

(Boo et al., 2015) and the research of languages other than English (LOTEs) might be a fruitful direction (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2017).

Although student's personality plays a central role in modern teaching methodology, our understanding of the students' motivation to study Czech and their own reflections of it are rather limited. Therefore, examining the potential change of attitudes among students of Czech language courses at Charles University, Prague, will bring more insight into the students' perspective of their own motivation to learn the Czech language. In order to find out what the students' reflections of their own attitudes are, a quantitative research tool (questionnaire) was used, the data were analysed and some pedagogic implications were drawn from the findings to help design classroom content in a way that meets the students' needs.

This paper will first discuss some key concepts relating to language attitudes and motivation. Empirical research will be presented next and some pedagogic implications will be drawn for classroom practice. Finally, since the research presented here also serves as a pilot phase of a larger scale research, the suitability of the research design needs to be assessed and suggestions for the future research made.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

All learners bring some attitudes and level of motivation to class (Gardner, 1985). Language attitudes can be defined as “the attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc.” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Learners create certain ideas concerning different aspects of language, language learning and language teaching, how the process of acquisition works and what the best way to learn for them is, usually based on their previous learning experience. These assumptions are commonly referred to as learner beliefs. Learner beliefs or language learning beliefs have been studied extensively both in general (Wenden, 1986; Horwitz, 1988, 2010) as well as in the context of study abroad (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Winke & Amuzie, 2009).

In the socio-educational model of motivation (Gardner, 1985), two types of attitudes relating to motivation to learn a second language are distinguished: attitudes toward learning the language (educational attitudes) and attitudes toward the other-language community (socio-cultural attitudes). For the purpose of this paper, three main variables influencing motivation should be pointed out (Gardner, 2005): besides attitudes toward the learning situation (the teacher and the course), integrativeness and instrumentality play a role (p. 6), probably “the most widely known concepts associated with Gardner's work” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 41). Integrativeness is based on the attitudes toward the target language community, the need to interact with them or become similar to them. Instrumentality is associated with practical reasons to learn the language, such as getting a job.

Later, in the 1990's, when Crookes and Schmidt (1995) called for re-opening of the motivation research agenda and suggested moving the concept of motivation closer





to the classroom practice where language learning mostly takes place, a three-level motivational system was introduced (Dörnyei, 1994). Here, the integrative and/or instrumental motive play a role on the language level and on the learner level and learning situation level, there are other important motivational components such as need for achievement and self-confidence in the former and course-specific, teacher-specific and group-specific components on the latter.

However, motivation is a dynamic concept that fluctuates in time and its theoretical model should reflect the temporal aspect (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). There are three main phases in the process of learning a second language. In the first, pre-actional phase, motivation works as a choice force. Here, the traditional integrative and/or instrumental factors would play a role. In the second, actional phase, motivation must be maintained and supported and, therefore, executive motivation comes to work. Finally, in the post-actional stage, causal attribution is formed with motivational retrospection.

At the turn of the century, Dörnyei (2005) tried to relate the second language acquisition research to modern psychology and synthesize the existing theoretical approaches into the L2 Motivational Self-System, building on the possible-selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The core lies in the individual's image of an ideal language self and what s/he should or should not do to reach it (the ought-to-self). Dörnyei added a third component, the L2 learning experience. An important factor of the motivational self-system is the emotional state of an individual as some scholars claim (Saito et al., 2018). Negative emotions, namely language anxiety have received most attention in research (for review see MacIntyre, 2017). Although certain level of tension is believed to have a motivating effect, anxiety may interfere with the learning process and anxious students may learn slower than relaxed students (Spada and Lightbown, 2006). Recently, positive emotions, such as enjoyment, have proven to play an important role in the process (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Both Garner's socio-educational model and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System as two major theoretical concepts widely used in research (Boo et al., 2015) consider only one second language the individual is learning. In the world where technology, mobility and globalisation penetrated all areas of life, multilingualism and plurilingualism have become an integral part of human communication (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). The monolingual bias should therefore be reconsidered, and the L2 Motivational Self-System may need to be adapted to a Multilingual Motivational Self-System (Henry, 2017), where the Ideal L2 Self should be replaced by the Ideal Multilingual Self.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

The present study took place among students in the courses of Czech as a second language³ in the study abroad programme at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic.

³ In this paper, we refer to second language, rather than foreign language learning, according to the notion that second language is "in a broader sense, any language learned



Students take the Elementary Czech Language classes for 13 weeks, which is usually the period of their stay. Courses meet twice a week for ninety minutes from 8.20 — 9.50 am, with an intensive introductory period of three hours in four consecutive days. Groups average ten or eleven students each and there were four different teachers teaching these groups. The students have zero command of Czech at the start. Czech language is a course mandatory for all of them and they get a grade at the end. 174 university students (aged 20 on average) in three consecutive semesters took part in the questioning presented in this paper.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

The research questions are: What are the students' initial attitudes towards learning Czech? Do they change throughout the semester? What factors do the students consider key to their attitudes? To investigate the participants' initial and final attitudes, students were given questionnaires with five questions, three of them were open and two closed with an option to explain the answers. Their retrospect view of their attitudes in the contrast to the end was examined and they were also asked what they think influenced their attitude. The questionnaires were printed and handed out to be filled in anonymously at the end of the last class of the semester. Students had fifteen minutes to answer and then handed the questionnaires back. This process repeated in three consecutive semesters. After the first semester, the answers were transcribed by the researcher and coded. The coding was then used to analyse the data from semester 2 and 3.

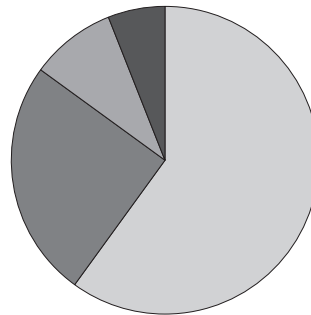
3. ANALYSIS

3.1 INITIAL ATTITUDES

Students expressed four main types of emotions relating to the idea of taking a Czech language course. Diagram 1 shows the representation of them among the students at the beginning. As we can see, the emotions can be divided into 1. negative, 2. positive, 3. mixed, 4. none. The individual diagrams for each group are presented in the appendix.

More than a half of the students expressed emotions that fall into the “negative” group. In general, these emotions have some relation to anxiety. Unfortunately, students have not been specific about the reasons why they felt anxious and at this point, we can only refer to the general concept of language learning anxiety and the reasons for it. Anxiety may be the personal trait of some of our students, they may display a significant level of anxiety in other classes as well and may be anxious about languages in general, not only Czech, which might stem from previous second language learning experience. All of them have studied a second language on college level at

after one's native language“ (Richards & Schmidt, 2010), although we are aware of the distinction.



□ Negative 60% ■ Positive 25% ■ Mixed 9% ■ None 6%

DIAGRAM 1: Initial attitudes

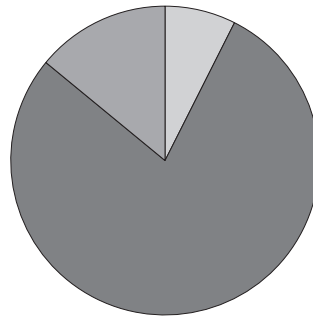
least and such experience may have led to their “inadequate linguistic self” (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). The anxiety may stem from the fear of failure, on the academic as well as social levels (Horwitz et al., 1986). Many of the students hold a strong opinion that their GPA affects their future career. Taking a course that might jeopardize their GPA can be too risky and may lead to negative emotions. For the future research that this phase is piloting, it will be useful to focus on the specific reasons for the anxiety in more detail.

3. 2 CHANGE OF ATTITUDES

Negative attitudes at the beginning of a course are not an exception (Gardner, 1985). Based on their experience, learners either keep the same attitude, or change it. Diagram 2 presents the final attitudes towards learning Czech and there we can see that the hypothesis of attitude change has been proven. At the end of the course, three quarters of the students expressed a positive attitude and they appreciate the effort they have made: “I am so glad I took it and learned more than I ever thought I would have. I am glad I did it. I feel like I’ve learned a lot.” Their final attitude is positive not only with respect to learning Czech, but also towards learning the local language while studying abroad as we can see in Diagram 3.

The overall attitude towards learning the local language at least to some extent is very positive. Almost 90% of the students would recommend learning Czech to a friend who studies in the Czech Republic and more than 90% of them think that everyone should learn the local language (although some of them regard the full semester course as not necessary). It is not clear from the survey whether this was their attitude at the beginning or whether they formed it during their stay. More research needs to be done to find out whether the general attitude towards learning the local language changes or not.

Although most of the students would recommend learning Czech because they think everyone should learn the local language, many students are not sure whether they would have signed up for the Czech course if it had not been mandatory. It could be expected that a course would not receive 100% enrolment if it



□ Negative 9% ■ Positive 95% ▒ Mixed 17%

DIAGRAM 2: Final attitudes

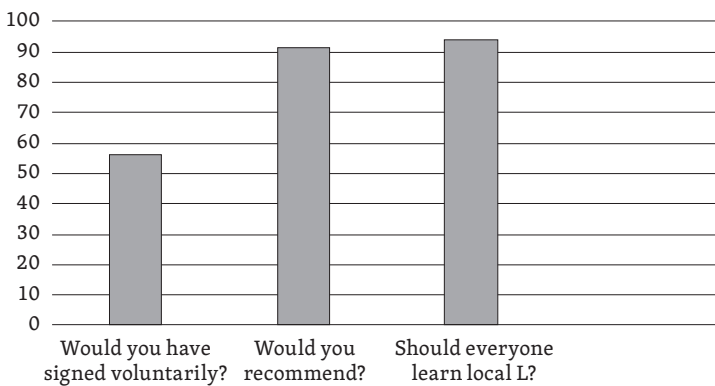


DIAGRAM 3: Attitudes toward learning local language (%)

were optional and the high levels of anxiety expressed at the beginning support this hypothesis. Besides anxiety, there could be other reasons such as the early hour of the course (8:20 am), which students often comment on throughout the semester and in their final course evaluations, or they simply have a weak ideal multilingual self. Answers to the question “Would you have signed up if the course were not mandatory?” revealed that only two thirds of the students (probably) would have. The number of students (almost 40%) who said they would not have signed up or are not sure is surprisingly high. Nevertheless, a lot of them added explicitly that even though they think they would not have signed up for Czech, they are now glad that they took it or that it was mandatory because it was very helpful. As one of the students pointed out: „I think that it needs to be mandatory because students (like me) don’t realize how useful it is.”

The significantly low potential enrolment rate for an optional course leads to an important question. How is it possible that almost a half of the university students from the USA coming to study in a country whose language they do not speak at all, do not regard taking an elementary level language course provided by the university



as a part of their programme important? Why are American students so poorly motivated to learn the language? Ushioda (2017) suggests that one reason may be language ideology, which defines language policy on individual, family, country, and national levels and impacts the decisions on what languages will be official, how valued will certain languages be and to what extent they will be available to be learned and spoken by individuals (Douglas Fir Group 2016, p. 33). She points out that the national language policy in Anglophone educational contexts emphasizes the practical aspects of second language use and emphasizes its instrumental value. Therefore, it seems to be harder to motivate and sustain the levels of motivation to study second language among students with English as L1. The whole world speaks English and the value of second language learning has been losing importance.

Many American students come to Prague believing that they can get by without any command of the local language. It proves to be true that in day-to-day communication in basic situations such as eating out, they can indeed do without any command of Czech. Outside this “comfort zone” however, when the ideology meets reality, they realize that not everyone in the world speaks English and that knowing some Czech may be useful and important as some students claim: “I realized less people speak English,” or “It’s not guaranteed that everything will be in English.” Only at this point, some students acknowledge the value of the language they had not been aware of before. Such experience may lead to the change in the attitude towards learning the local language.

3. 3 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ATTITUDES

Students were asked what they think influenced their attitude. The factors can be grouped into four main categories: 1. educational, 2. integrative, 3. linguistic, and 3. instrumental. The strongest factor in forming their attitude was the educational situation — the course and the teacher, which received almost 100 mentions among the 174 answers. Students describe the qualities of the teacher which they appreciated: “patient, kind, positive, has a sense of humour,” etc. and the content of the course or the specific methodology used: “fun, engaging class, interactive classes, teaching style,” etc. For some students, the relation of class content to the real life played a crucial role. They linked the content of the course to the usage outside class, making a strong connection between the educational and integrative factors.

Encountering situations when they had to or wanted to interact in Czech outside class was the second strongest factor that influenced the students’ attitude. The integrative motive plays an important role among our students from the very beginning, they want to be able to communicate with local people. Reaching this goal during the semester lead to positive evaluation of the experience. Failing in reaching it and not being able to interact with Czechs in Czech made the students regard learning Czech as not worth the effort.

An important aspect both for the integrative motive and the educational situation was success. Success in the classroom represented by good grades lead to the increase of positive attitude, bad grades influenced it negatively as some students stated ex-



plicitly. Outside the classroom, the same can be said about success or failure in communication with locals in everyday situations. The survey confirmed motivational strength of success in all aspects of instruction and use of the language.

The attitude towards learning a specific language may be influenced by the individual's attitude towards learning languages in general. When a student has positive attitude to languages in general, s/he thinks s/he has language aptitude and the circumstances throughout the course do not change this attitude, his/her final attitude will be positive, despite possible initial anxiety. Some students admitted that they are "just not a language person" due to their inadequate linguistic self and they kept this attitude. The negative attitude was also caused by the nature of the Czech language — it is different from languages that the students have studied before and for some, it was simply too hard to learn. The questionnaires confirmed that the "inadequate linguistic self" is a trait that is hard to change. Whether the semester in the Czech Republic helped to overcome their ideology is hard to measure here.

The fourth influential factor is the instrumental value of learning the language, which reflects the urge to use it while studying in the Czech Republic. Many students think in a broader scheme and wonder to what extent it will bring value within their study programme and whether it will be useful when they return home. Some students state at the end that they have learned something useful for the stay but useless in the broader sense, which leads them to a rather sceptical evaluation of their learning. They cannot see the instrumental value for their future. It might be useful to strengthen the value of learning the language outside the scope of the stay in the country, as will be suggested later among the pedagogic implications.

Diagram 4 presents a summary of the key factors the students stated. The figures represent number of mentions, not percentage. If one student stated more factors at a time, for example the class and the fact that they could communicate outside class, this would result into two different factors counted separately.

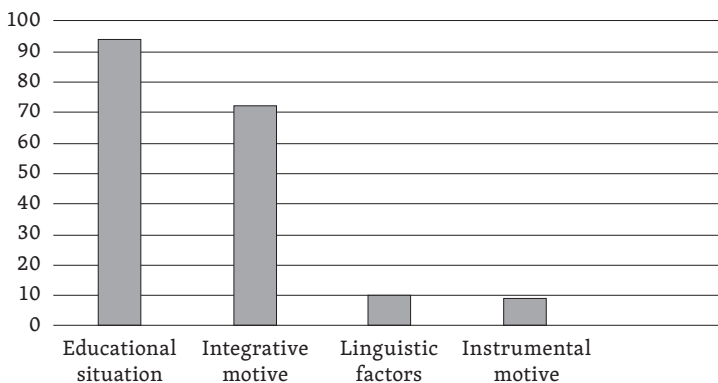


DIAGRAM 4: What influenced your attitude?



4. PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the data showed that a high number of students display a certain level of uneasiness at the start of the semester. In each semester, the percentage of students expressing a certain level of anxiety at the start and the ratio of positive final attitudes were similar (see Appendix for diagrams). It is not clear whether this finding may be generalized to other types of courses or not. However, it may always be useful for the teacher to find out about the group — what emotions the students feel, what their attitudes toward learning the language and their language learning beliefs are and where these come from. The teacher should help to overcome potential anxiety. If the situation and group permit, the teacher can plan a language learning awareness session, where students may express their opinions and experience and discuss them in class. It is advisable to use some of the motivational strategies suggested for the start of the actional stage, such as setting realistic goals, increase the expectations of success, create friendly environment etc. (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Kubanyova, 2014).

Another important result is the fact that students themselves regard the course and the teacher as the key factor for forming their attitude towards the language. The teacher and the curriculum designer (if not the same person) are responsible for the students' attitudes toward the target language. The teacher and the course may become a "lens" through which the students see the language (Gardner, 1985). When planning the syllabus, the designer should keep in mind four motivational components relating to the course: interest, relevance, expectancy, and satisfaction (Keller, 1983). The content of the course, classroom activities, providing feedback and other elements of the class should fulfil the requirements of motivational teaching in order to increase the students' positive attitudes.

As expected, communication in the target language outside class is a strong motive to learn it. Success or failure in these interactions played an important role in forming the attitudes. Students in American Study Abroad programmes generally tend to form peer groups and do not get into contact with locals as much as they should or would like to (Kinginger, 2008). In order to strengthen the integrative component of motivation, the curriculum should include a large number of options to provide the students with such interactive opportunities. For many students, communicating with Czechs in Czech means stepping outside their "comfort zone", which the teacher should be aware of and help the students on their way outside the zone. Various field trips and excursion where the students can practice interaction even with the limited command of the language have always received positive feedback from the students. It may be a useful motivational strategy to increase their linguistic confidence.

Overall, the instrumental value of language learning among the students proved to be true. They want to learn something that is useful instantly. Their personal language ideologies stem from the higher levels of language ideology (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Ushioda (2017) recommends increasing the students' positive attitudes towards the ideal multilingual self. Within the scope of a semester study abroad course the teachers only have a limited chance to affect the language ideology in the broader sense but in our courses, we can influence the students' beliefs, set our own example

of interest in foreign languages strengthen their ideal multilingual self and help students realize that the impact of learning does not cease with their boarding on the plane. The learning experience impacts their identity and may influence their future second language studies or understanding other cultures.

One way of fostering the multilingual self might be compulsory language classes within study abroad. Obviously, the students participating in this study do not have a strong multilingual self initially. Although making a second language a compulsory part of the curriculum on a large scale has brought mixed results (Cook & Singleton, 2014) and may seem unpopular among students, this study proved that the students themselves realize their own inability to accurately assess the value of learning the language before they actually learned it. Dropping the local language from the curriculum would decrease the value of multilingual self on a global scale and the students would lose the chance to enhance their study abroad experience due to the lack of local language competence.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN EVALUATION

The aim of the questioning was to find out whether this method brings enough data to answer the research questions and also to create hypothesis for a larger scale research. It has brought 174 answers, which have proven that there is some change of attitudes toward Czech and that motivation is a dynamic concept changing in time. There are some limitations to the data collection design, however. First, students fill in the questionnaire at the end of their courses. The questioning has shown that the students are themselves aware of their own attitude change. It is possible that their retrospect view might be slightly different from what they really felt at the start⁴. In the future, it will be useful to ask them right at the beginning and then again, at the end. It might, however, be rather difficult to administer questionnaires anonymously and at the same time match the initial and final answers to the same person to see whether there has been some change. Therefore, a different data collection tool might be more effective to gain the target data.

The second limitation is that the quantitative data collection only shows a general portrait. We have learned that the motivation changes. We do not know enough about how the process works for individual students, whether the paths are similar or different, whether there are some other implicit factors that the students did not state in their answers but might come out if a different research design is used. Therefore, in the next stage of the research, data will be collected in a different design — qualitative study in line with current appeal to use more qualitative methods in researching motivation (Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Riemer, 2004; Spolsky, 2000; Ushioda, 1994). The collection tool will be a language learning diary, which should re-

4 Three more questionnaires were created and filled in by students at the start of the course. The results helped to portray what the general initial attitudes, expectations and beliefs are and will not be reflected in this paper because they do not reveal enough about the dynamics of motivation.



flect the individual's journey from the start to the end in the real time, not retrospect. Additionally, the combination of quantitative and qualitative designs should bring more data for triangulation.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper presented the findings of questioning among American students studying Czech as a second language during their study abroad programme. It has shown that the attitudes of the students change and that the educational situation and the integrative motive play a central role in the process. In order to present conclusions that may be generalized, more research must be done.

The research (both qualitative and quantitative) will also take place in a similar but different program — Erasmus+. Although these programmes resemble in many aspects, there are differences between the American and European study abroad programmes (Kinging, 2008) that may play a role in the research and its findings. The multilingual self-concept should be explored in more detail.

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APPENDIX

1. Questionnaire

This questionnaire is a part of the research on how students feel about learning Czech. Your answers are important for us to understand how the process works. Please answer honestly. Děkuju!

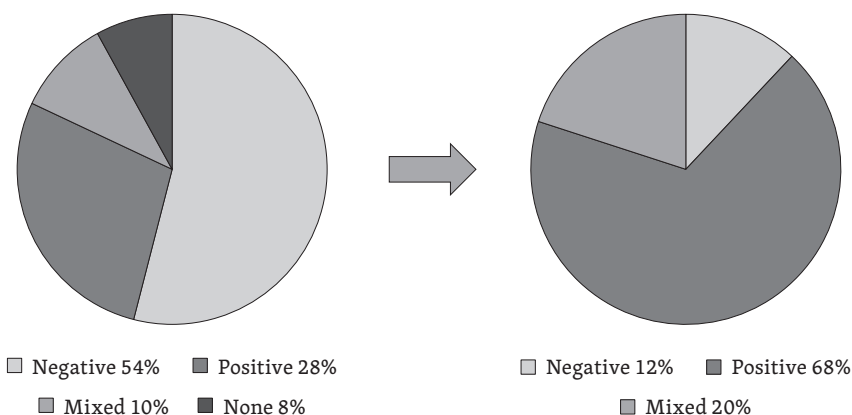
1. How did you feel about learning Czech before your arrival here?
2. What is your attitude now?
3. What influenced your attitude?



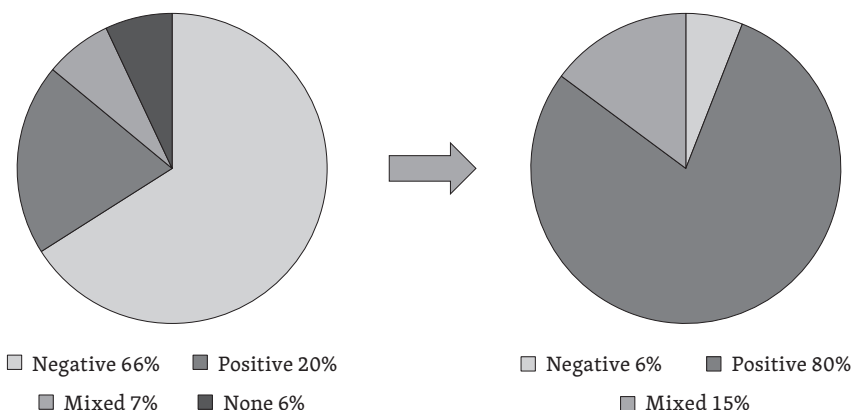
4. Would you have signed for Czech if it were not mandatory? Why (not)?
5. If a friend of yours was a student in the Czech Republic, would you recommend him/her to take Czech lessons? Why (not)?
6. Do you think that everyone should learn the local language during their semester abroad?

2. Change of attitudes — separate diagram for each semester shows the initial (left diagram) and final attitudes (right diagram).

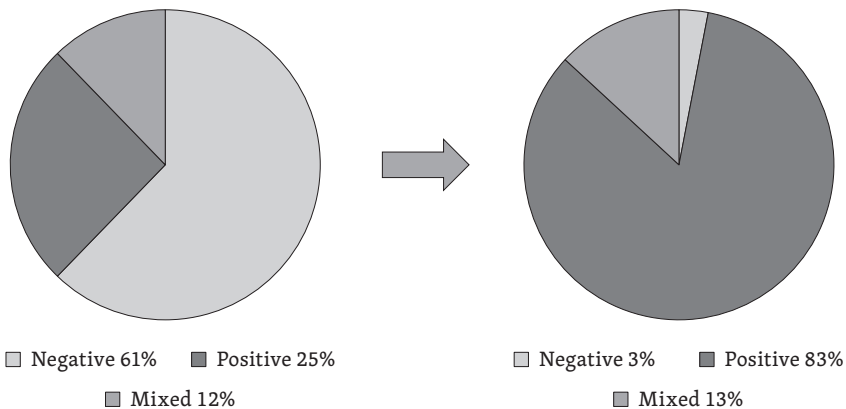
Semester 1 (76 students)



Semester 2 (67 students)



Semester 3 (31 students)



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