



SEINÄJOEN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU
SEINÄJOKI UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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ANALYSING EXPATRIATES' EXPERIENCE WITH "CULTURE SHOCK" IN CZECH REPUBLIC – RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY STUDENTS AND THEIR THEORETICAL AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

K. Pavlica¹, I. Matoušková¹, C. Isaacs²

¹Škoda Auto University (CZECH REPUBLIC)

²SeAMK (FINLAND)

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an analysis of 95 interviews conducted by Skoda Auto University (SAU) students with expatriates who have lived and worked in the Czech Republic (CR) for a minimum of 2 years. Interviews were held during the period of October 2022 – May 2023. The paper is divided into three parts.

Part one describes the objectives and methodology of the research. The research pursued the following objectives: (1) answer to the question if "culture shock" should be understood as a closed linear or as a repetitive cyclical process (Marx, 2011); (2) identification of the main expatriates' adaptation problems to Czech culture; (3) convey to Czech SAU students practical insights into both the nature of culture shock and critical aspects of the Czech culture in the view of expatriates; (4) exploitation of the research results in adaptation programs for SAU foreign students. The research methodology was based on structured interviews containing 14 open questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, and they covered the following topics: (1) identity (i.e., nationality, time spent in CR) of the respondent – 6 items; (2) preparing to stay in the CR – 2 items; (3) the most difficult adaptation problems in the beginning of the stay in the CR – 2 items; (4) recurring and current adaptation problems – 4 items. Interviews results were analysed in two steps. The first step was conducted by the students, who: (1) identified all adaptation problems of the respondents including their resources; (2) explained what they learnt from the interviews. In the second step the authors of this paper conducted open coding of both the answers to interviews questions and the results of the students' analysis. Open coding is the systematic analysis of qualitative data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships (Saldaña, 2021).

Part two describes research results. Analysis of the interviews led to the following findings: (1) Sample description – i.e. majority of respondents (68) came from EU countries; average time spent in the CR was 5,9 years; (2) Preparation to stay in CR - majority of the respondents (72) did not prepare; (3) The most difficult initial adaptation problem – language barrier; (3) Recurring and current adaptation problems – i.e. understanding the Czech administrative system; some Czech cultural traditions; cultural prejudice and stereotypes of some Czechs; (4) Czech students' lessons from the interviews – new knowledge about culture shock (i.e. long-term learning process; importance of language skills) and about critical aspects of the Czech culture (i.e. many Czechs are xenophobic).

Part three presents the conclusions of the project. In reference to the objectives of the research it can be concluded: (1) Results of the interviews indicate that culture shock represents a repetitive cyclical process; (2) Main adaptation problems of expatriates to Czech culture are associated with language barriers, reserved behaviour and cultural prejudice of Czechs, as well as the functioning of the Czech administrative system; (3) Students gained new insights into both the nature of culture shock and the Czech culture; (4) Selected interviews will be integrated in a form of short case studies into the SAU adaptation program for foreign students; Czech language courses on these programs will be more practically oriented. Due to their success, interviews with expatriates will also be integrated into the teaching at a SAU partner university in Finland.

Keywords: acculturation, culture shock, structured interviews, adaptation problems, adaptation program, open coding, Czech culture, Czech language.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of an analysis of 95 interviews conducted by Skoda Auto University (SAU) students of the subject "Culture, Organization and Management" with expatriates who have lived and worked in the Czech Republic (CR) for a minimum of 2 years. Interviews were held during the period

of October 2022 – May 2023. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part describes objectives and methodology of the research. The second part presents the most important and interesting research results. The last part summarizes and discusses the results of the project.

2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

SAU subject Culture, Organization and Management was designed for the master's degree students. The subject covers such areas like concepts of culture and organizational culture, dimensions of cross-cultural difference, expatriation and culture shock, intercultural communication. Research conducted in cooperation between students and authors of this paper is related to the topic of expatriation and culture shock.

The concept of culture shock refers to acculturation process associated with the efforts to live and work in a strange/new cultural and social environment [1]. The traditional view of culture shock is linear. It understands culture shock as a closed process which consists of five phases: (1) exhilaration or "honeymoon"; (2) frustration and anger or "shock"; (3) recovery; (4) adjustment and acculturation; (5) re-acculturation or "re-entry shock" [1], [2]. There exists an alternative to this view. Marx [3] claims that culture shock should be conceptualized as repetitive cyclical process by which the stages of shock and recovery alternate. The authors of this paper agree with Marx because of the following reasons: (1) Culture shock is an experiential learning process; within experiential learning framework identification and implementation of a solution to any problem creates new challenges and perspectives [4]; (2) person never adapts to the whole cultural system but only to its particular parts, aspects or elements; there exist a relatively high probability that after adaptation to one part of culture individual will sooner or later face a new adaptation challenge; (3) cultures are changing and developing in time; even their own members can never be fully adapted to them. In brief, it makes sense to assume that individuals can be subjected to both new and recurring problems and challenges during their adaptation to a strange culture.

The decision to start a research focused on an analysis of the expatriates' experience with adaptation to Czech culture and society followed four main objectives: (1) answer to the question if culture shock should be understood as a closed linear or as a repetitive cyclical process; (2) identification of the main expatriates' adaptation problems to Czech culture; (3) convey to Czech SAU students practical insights into both the nature of culture shock and critical aspects of the Czech culture in the view of expatriates; (4) exploitation of the research results in adaptation programs designed for SAU foreign students. Objectives 1 and 2 are theoretical in their nature – they are related to a search for and identification of a new knowledge about culture shock. Objectives 3 and 4 are more practical – they are associated with the efforts to improve and move forwards quality of an educational process at SAU.

To meet the above objectives a method of structured interviews conducted by SAU students with expatriates was chosen. The task to conduct these interviews was integrated into the course assessment criteria. In initial instruction students were asked to identify, contact, and interview an expatriate who have lived and worked in the CR for a minimum of two years. Interviews were conducted face to face in Czech or English language (selected language of the interview depended on expatriate's language skills). Each interview contained the same 14 open questions covering the following topics: (1) identity related data (age, gender, time spent in the CR, country of origin, marital status, children) of an expatriate; (2) preparing to stay in the CR (Did you prepare for your stay in the CR? How?) – 2 items; (3) the most difficult adaptation problems in the beginning of the stay in the CR (What were the most difficult problems in the beginning ...? How did you cope with them?) – 2 items; (4) recurring and current adaptation problems (What are the recurring/new problems? How do you cope with them?) – 4 items.

Data collected by the means of interviews were analysed in two steps. The first step and level of an analysis was conducted by the students as a part of the interview assignment. Students were asked to: (1) explain what they learned about culture shock and (2) what they learned about Czech culture.

The second step and level of the data analysis was conducted by the authors of this paper. They conducted open coding of both the answers to interview questions (except of the answers to identity items) and the results of the students' reflections of the interviews' results. Open coding is the systematic analysis of qualitative data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships [5]. It is a process by which codes to the observed data are attached during an analysis. In our case answers (i.e., adaptation problems) with the same and/or similar meaning (i.e., Language - I did not understand it, Czech language – I did not speak a word etc.) were attached one code (i.e., Language barrier). There was also identified number of responses falling under each code.

3 RESEARCH RESULTS

Research results will be presented in reference to the different topics covered by interview questions.

We will start with **sample description** (identity related answers): Average age of the respondents was 34,5 years (interval from 22 years to 47 years); there were 62 males and 33 females on a sample; average time spent in the CR was 5,9 years; majority of the expatriates (68) came from EU countries, the rest was from USA, Russia, Ukraine and Vietnam; approximately half of the respondents (46) was married; married expatriates had children. All married expatriates stayed in the CR with their families.

The second topic of the interviews was related to the **preparation of the expatriates for their stay in the CR**. Most of the respondents (72) did not prepare at all. The rest of them learned from friends and/or colleagues who visited CR before (12), read books about CR and its culture (11). 9 respondents mentioned that they tried to learn some Czech phrases. In summary interviewed expatriates underestimated the importance of appropriate preparation for a stay in the CR.

The third topic of the interviews was focused on an **identification of the main expatriates' adaptation problems during the initial stages of their stay in the CR**. Respondents mentioned the following kinds of problems:

- **Language barriers** (95): All expatriates spoke about problems associated with no or poor knowledge of the Czech language. When asked how they coped with this issue, following categories of responses were obtained: *trying to learn Czech language individually; enrolment in language school; using google translator; going out with Czech friends (i.e., for a beer and communicating with them*. It is possible to state that only a combination of language school/courses with the other described activities can lead to success in learning Czech language.
- **Dealing with Czech officials at the offices** (47): Nearly a half of the respondents mentioned problems with Czech officials – i.e., *Many of them don't speak any other foreign language, than English and even English language skills are usually poor*. When asked how they coped with this problem the most common type of response was: *I asked Czech colleagues or friends to visit the office with me and assist me there*. This solution is effective.
- **Reserved nature of many Czechs** (34): Relatively many expatriates pointed to reserved character of Czech people: i.e., *Czech people are not so communicative like people at my home; It was difficult to find a friend in the beginning*. When asked how they coped with this problem two kinds of responses were obtained: *I did nothing special – I was trying to get used to it; I was trying to find a friend (i.e., at work, in a place where I stay)*.
- **People don't speak foreign languages** (3): This problem can be related to communication problems at the offices as well as to language barriers.

The fourth topic of the interviews was focused on identification of current and recurring problems. **In reference to current/new problems expatriates spoke about:**

- **Nothing** (51): i.e., *I have no adaptation problems now; I face no special adaptation problems*. This was a typical answer of expatriates who have spent 3 years and more in the CR.
- **Language** (44): The rest of the expatriates pointed to continuing language problems however: i.e., *Conversation is still a problem; I am not able to have a proper chat with friends in the Czech language*. When asked how they cope with this issue, following categories of responses were obtained: *learning on the language courses; learning from friends/colleagues; learning from my Czech spouse*. The issue and challenge for the Czech educational system represents a finding that many (23) respondents passed successfully through compulsory Czech language courses, but this did not lead to an improvement of their everyday-life practical speaking skills.
- **Czech cultural traditions** (20): Some respondents combined a reference to language problems with difficulties to understand and/or accept some of the Czech cultural traditions. These were associated with Christmas and Easter time holidays. In particular: i.e., *Carp killing on the streets at Christmas; Whipping women at Easter*. These traditions are criticized also by some Czechs. Carp killing on the streets is always addressed before Christmas time by animal protection activists. This tradition is associated with a custom to sell live carps (traditional Czech Christmas fish) in the stalls. Whipping women on Easter Monday is criticized by gender equality activists. This tradition has its roots in pagan times. Slight whipping of women with young willow rods symbolized an act of their rejuvenation after winter.

- **Understanding health care system** (19): This can be related to problems with Czech administrative system (see topic 3). There were combined two sets of problems under this code. The first set is related to understanding principles of health care functioning, including health insurance. The second set refers to a fact that many doctors speak only basic English.

When talking about recurring problems respondents pointed to the following issues:

- **Nothing** (41): i.e., Nothing is repeated, I feel adapted.
- **Language** (38): Problems with mastering Czech language represented the most common kind of recurring problems – i.e., Speaking Czech in a new situation/context; I believed I can speak Czech but sometimes I interact with people using different accent or dialect and I am lost. When asked how they cope with these situations expatriates referred to the following approaches: Patience; Asking for repetition; Asking friends for help and explanation.
- **Prejudice** (5): This problem was mentioned by expatriates from Russia and Ukraine – i.e., Some Czechs obviously don't like me because I am from Russia; Some people refuse to communicate with me when they find out that I speak with my specific accent. Due to historical experience (i.e., occupation in 1968) and propaganda in media many Czechs still share a negative stereotype towards people from former USSR. This problem can be linked also to already mentioned reserved nature of the Czechs (see above).

New insights of the students into the nature of culture shock and into the Czech culture can be summarized in the following way:

- **Importance of preparation before expatriation** (39): i.e., It is important to prepare properly before any expatriation; Many problems of my respondent followed from a fact that she did not prepare for her stay in the CR; Culture shock is a long-term learning process, and everyone should take this fact seriously; Important part of a good preparation represents learning language of a host country.
- **Importance of learning foreign languages in the CR** (11): i.e., I found out that many problems followed from a fact that many Czechs still speak no foreign language – this a real challenge to our educational system.
- **Some Czechs are xenophobic** (7): i.e., I feel ashamed of xenophobic behaviour of some Czechs; I was not aware of a fact that so many people share this (against Ukrainians) cultural prejudice.
- **Need for optimistic attitude** (6): i.e., I think that Czechs should learn to be more optimistic and open.
- **Czech culture is not so bad** (3): i.e., I learned that our culture is not so bad and unfriendly as some people believe.

Conducting and analysing interviews was obviously useful to SAU students.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In reference to the research findings as well as to the objectives of the research presented in section two (objectives and methodology of the research) it can be concluded:

- The results of the interviews indicate that culture shock represents a repetitive cyclical process as it has been proposed by Marx [3]. Within a Czech cultural context, the most common recurring and new adaptation problems are typically associated with language barrier, understanding Czech administrative system (including health care), some cultural traditions and with cultural prejudice of some Czechs.
- Most of the initial and new/recurring adaptation problems are associated with language barriers. This issue is two-sided. On one side expatriates did not prepare for their stay in the CR properly and they cannot speak Czech language, therefore. On the other side, many Czechs either speak only one foreign language (usually English) or no foreign language. This situation can easily lead to many intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts.
- Some expatriates tried to overcome language barriers via taking either compulsory Czech language courses or the courses offered by language schools. The trouble is, that their everyday life practical language skills did not improve significantly after a successful completion of these

courses: i.e. *I went to a Czech course offered by my employer. We all passed our tests but in real life I was and still am too often lost for words.* This situation corresponds to Sherman's findings about the problems in Czech language education in the CR [6] as well as to practical experience of the authors of this paper.

- Students gained new insights into both the nature of culture shock and Czech culture. They found participation on this research useful and interesting.
- Starting from January 2024 selected interviews will be integrated in a form of short case studies into the SAU adaptation program for foreign students. Czech language courses implemented on these programs will be more practically oriented to teaching everyday life important phrases and expressions.

Due to their success, interviews with expatriates will also be integrated into the teaching relevant subjects at SAU partner university in Finland. Co-author of this paper C. Isaacs will take responsibility for this step. In other words, our research also contributed to both deepening of a cooperation between two Erasmus partner universities and to enrichment of their curricula.

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