

## **Czech as a Foreign Language Courses: Necessary, Scarce and Expensive?**

**Violeta Prokofjeva**

### **Abstract:**

From January 2009 the Czech Republic will introduce a new regulation for people applying for permanent residence (*trvalý pobyt*) – the requirement to pass the Czech as a Foreign Language (CFL) examination. The commentary discusses the current situation in the infrastructure of CFL training in different parts of the Czech Republic, as well as obstacles faced by immigrants in obtaining the necessary training.

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From January 2009 the Czech Republic will introduce a new regulation for people applying for permanent residence (*trvalý pobyt*). Applications for permanent residence in most cases can be submitted after five years of uninterrupted residence in the Czech Republic, and from January 2009 the application package will have to include a certificate of Czech language skills at least at the level A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>1</sup>. The state authorities will cover the costs for each applicant to sit one examination. The language training, however, will be neither organised nor covered by the state, possibly exposing economically and socially vulnerable migrants to additional financial stress. As a result, the new legislation aimed at promoting the integration of foreigners into Czech society, may have the reverse effect of marginalising certain migrant groups. This article discusses obstacles to obtaining appropriate language training in order to pass the Czech language examination facing migrants, especially in the lower income groups.

From September 2008, detailed information about the Czech as a Foreign Language (CFL) test for those seeking permanent residence will be available. However, as of now, no attempts have been made to compile information about availability of CFL courses, especially affordable ones, across the Czech Republic. In order to gain an overview of the availability of

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<sup>1</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is a document adopted by the EU to facilitate common recognition of language qualifications to increase occupational and educational mobility. The framework describes communicative skills, associated grammar skills and situations of communication at each of six levels of language competency (the lowest being A1 and the highest C2)

courses, I compiled a long list of language schools offering CFL courses in all regions of the Czech Republic. Further to that I made email and telephone inquiries about their offers of CFL courses. In addition, I attempted to identify non-profit organisations providing free or low-cost Czech language training for immigrants. The article focuses mainly on language courses, rather than individual training, since group training in most cases is cheaper and affordability is an important consideration in the context of migrants with limited financial resources.

One of problems possibly faced by immigrants is the great disparity in the availability of CFL courses in the various regions of the Czech Republic. Of all the Czech Regions, Prague has the highest concentration of foreigners<sup>2</sup> and about 11 500 of them will qualify for permanent residence at the beginning of 2009.<sup>3</sup> In Prague, a wide range of CFL courses is available. The majority of courses are offered by private language schools. Through my research I was able to identify 25 language schools that were planning to open some kind of CFL course in the autumn of 2008. The capacity of individual courses varies, generally however it is about 10 persons. While most schools offer only one beginners/A1 level course, a couple of larger schools (e.g. *AKCENT International House*, *Caledonian School*, *Jazyková škola SF Servis*, *Jazykový Institut Praha*, *Státní jazyková škola*) have several different courses which increases the total capacity of each school to 30 – 40 students. However, this brings the total capacity of private language schools to approximately 400 students.

A relatively large number of individuals also offer CFL teaching. On the internet, individual advertisements of CFL teaching feature prominently on the largest English language expatriate website [www.expats.cz](http://www.expats.cz), the website of the Association of Czech Language Teachers <http://www.auccj.cz/>, a professional association, and the privately run English language website [www.bohemica.com](http://www.bohemica.com) list. However, the popularity of the websites among migrants, especially ones that have little English or Czech language knowledge is hard to estimate.

In addition, a number of Prague-based non-governmental organisations specialising on issues of migration and integration also plan to open low-cost or free CFL courses specifically aimed at various disadvantaged migrant groups in autumn 2008 (e.g. *META o.s. - Sdružení pro příležitosti mladých migrantů*, *Centrum pro Integraci Cizinců (CIC)*, *Poradna pro Integraci, Berkat*). However, the capacity of courses offered by NGOs is limited by their resources. For example, the *CIC* courses for students with mixed language proficiency are limited by the available classroom space, which means usually approximately 30 – 50 students can fit into classroom. The others organisations usually teach in smaller classes of about 10 – 12 students. An optimistic estimate of the capacity of NGO CFL courses in Prague would be around 100 – 150, which brings the total number of available places on language courses in Prague to about 550. Even if only a small number of the 11 500 foreigners qualifying for permanent residence

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<sup>2</sup> 132 454 from the total 406 655<sup>2</sup> foreigners with either permanent residence or other types of residence permit Czech Statistical Office data, 30.04.2008 [http://www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci.nsf/t/5C00441AE2/\\$File/c01t02.pdf](http://www.czso.cz/csu/cizinci.nsf/t/5C00441AE2/$File/c01t02.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Estimate of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports

in Prague at the beginning of 2008 wish to attend a language course, the capacity of CFL teaching is likely to be stretched.

In other regions of the Czech Republic, the situation is even less favourable. Most courses are subject to a minimum number of students who have to sign up in order for the course to open, usually the number varies between three and five. Some schools explicitly warn that they retain the right to cancel scheduled courses and return fee payment in cases where not enough students sign up. It may seem a relatively small number, however, many schools, especially in smaller cities, pointed to the complexity of forming a group of students that would be at the same level of language proficiency, would have the same or similar mother tongue (usually labelled in language teaching as L1) and would be able to attend classes at the same time of the day.

The issue of common L1 is especially significant since students with a Slavic L1, such as Bulgarian, Russian or Ukrainian, progress in CFL acquisition at a much faster pace than students from other linguistic backgrounds. In addition, students from Asian countries, such as Vietnam and Mongolia, may require training in pronunciation which further extends the length of CFL acquisition even at the A1 level. As a result, even though a lot of schools advertise CFL in their list of foreign language courses, an inquiry over the telephone would often reveal that teaching is available only on individual basis or that the course will be opened only if students sign up as a group.

Similarly to Prague a number of NGOs (e.g. *Sdružení občanů zabývajících se emigranty (SOZE)* in Brno, *Diecézní charita* in Plzeň, *Oberig* in Liberec, *CIC* in Karlovy Vary, *České Budějovice* and *Plzeň*, or *Jiří Mahen Library* in Brno) provide low-cost CFL training in the regions.

*SOZE* focuses on language acquisition as a crucial aspect of integration of foreigners, and has a relatively large CFL teaching capacity<sup>4</sup>. The organisation has developed extensive CFL training expertise and networks in the Czech Regions, as a part of its asylum seeker language training programme. However this organisation which offered CFL courses for free during the last teaching period (2007/2008), when language examination was not a condition for granting permanent residence, had waiting list of about 400 persons, which demonstrates the high demand for courses. A down-side of free language courses, according to *SOZE*, is that their courses are often also attended by students who can afford to pay for commercial courses<sup>5</sup> and the high drop-out rate of students – *SOZE* course completion rate is about 30 – 40% of enrolled students. Hence, some co-payment for courses may increase the successful completion of courses. In addition to CFL courses, *SOZE* is able to provide contact to teachers of CFL in regions where it does not run regular courses.

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<sup>4</sup> In the 2007/2008 teaching period, *SOZE* taught in various cities (Brno, Olomouc, Zlín and others) 30 000 hours of CFL, half for asylum seekers, and half for other groups of foreigners

<sup>5</sup> Such as the employees of IBM Brno

The other NGO-organised courses in the regions are smaller in scale and their capacity is usually around 10 – 12 persons. Moreover, some other restrictions on participation may apply, such as at the courses organised by the *Jiří Mahen Library* in Brno, which is only open for students of Ukrainian origin.

In certain regions the availability of commercial CFL courses is very limited despite existence of a large foreign community. For instance, in Karlovy Vary region I was able to locate only one school that is planning to offer CFL course in the autumn semester of 2008.<sup>6</sup> According to my estimate, CFL course capacity in this region lies somewhere between 50 and 60 students. At the same time, Karlovy Vary region has the largest single Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic totalling almost half of the region's foreigners.<sup>7</sup> Not all of them will qualify for permanent residence in 2008 or even 2009.<sup>8</sup> However, since students with non-Slavic L1 require a considerably longer time to prepare for CFL examination, provision of accessible, affordable language training for this group should be of concern for policy makers already today.

It is an open question if the capacity of CFL courses across the Czech Republic, both commercial and NGO provided, is sufficient for the demand. Representatives of NGOs I interviewed, were hesitant about making judgements, and suggested that in larger cities such as Prague and Brno, the capacity of commercial courses should be sufficient. The NGO provided courses may be more popular among immigrants due to their affordability, and hence their capacity may at times be stretched. In the smaller cities and certain regions CFL course availability and capacity is certainly limited.

Another major obstacle on the way to acquisition of the CFL is lack of easily accessible information about courses on offer. Currently, no centralised information is available on CFL courses. During a conversation with a representative of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, I found out that the Ministry does not intend to compile information on its websites<sup>9</sup>, which are intended to serve as the central information point on the reform, due to lack of a quality control mechanism of CFL courses and unwillingness to endorse private schools.

Firstly, the decision to choose English as the second language of the website is puzzling, as English is by far not the most commonly spoken language of immigrants in the Czech Republic.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the lack of information on available courses means that in order to find information about language training, immigrants have to search across a wide range of public

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to a *CIC* low-cost course

<sup>7</sup> According to data of Czech Statistical Office, in 2007 9 231 of 19 442 foreigners in Karlovy vary region were Vietnamese citizens

<sup>8</sup> According to the estimates of Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, in 2008 719 foreigners will qualify for permanent residence and in 2009 another 756 foreigners will qualify for permanent residence

<sup>9</sup> <http://cestina-pro-cizince.cz/>, which is written in Czech, and <http://www.check-your-czech.com/>, which is in English

<sup>10</sup> According to the data of Czech Statistical Office in 2007 Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Slovaks, Poles and Russians were the largest foreign communities in the Czech Republic

sources. In order to identify appropriate courses or an instructor, some language skills such as English, German or some Czech are indispensable as most information in the public space (internet, flyers from language schools and NGOs) is available in these languages. Furthermore, searching for an appropriate language course may be a time-consuming activity and requires certain information searching skills. If migrant does not already possess adequate language skills, does not have the time or skills to search for an appropriate course, the process of CFL acquisition may stall at the very first step.

Even if the migrant is able to locate a language school, the nature of the available information can be rather confusing. The types of courses, their length, teaching materials required can vary a great deal. Only few language schools seem to be aware of the new requirement of A1 language examination for acquisition of residence permit, and have started offering courses tailored specially for this purpose and advertised as such. Others, however, offer simply beginners courses that last anywhere from a week to a year with different intensity. In the course of my research, most schools I contacted admitted that the student should be able to pass the A1 exam at some point of the course (or several consecutive courses), most also admit that required time depends a lot on the mother tongue of the student, not to mention motivation of the student. In combination with lack of a mechanism to control the quality of courses, a danger exists that an immigrant may receive inadequate CFL training despite having paid a relatively large amount of money.

If one does choose individual training, the price usually falls between 250 – 400 CZK per lesson depending on the region. Multiplied by 140 lessons – just one estimate of the average number of hours required for reaching A1<sup>11</sup> – the acquisition of permanent residence would become very expensive indeed. Even if the student successfully finds a course at a language school, the average price for a standard semester consisting of about 72 teaching hours (45 minutes) would be in the range from 2800 CZK in the regions to about 6000 CZK in Prague. This means that in order to reach the required level, something between 5600 CZK and 12000 CZK would be needed. According to my estimates, low-income immigrants usually receive salaries ranging between 10 and 14 thousand CZK per month, so covering costs of a commercial CFL course could pose a serious obstacle for taking up a course, especially if it has to be covered in a one-off payment.

If a person intending to take up a CFL course manages to find information about some of the language courses offered by NGOs in the regions, the costs sink significantly – to about 1000 CZK for a semester-long course (*Most Pro Lidská Práva* in Pardubice), or they may even be for free (*CIC* courses in České Budějovice, Karlovy Vary, Plzeň and Prague). From the experience of *CIC*, immigrants seem to find out about their low-cost courses more through informal channels and word-of-mouth rather than formal channels such as advertising in newspapers. However, an open question remains the capacity of the NGOs in providing low-cost or free CFL training, and finding ways to ensure this capacity reaches the target groups – the genuinely low-income immigrants.

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<sup>11</sup>Estimate taken from the website <http://www.en.domavcr.cz/news/300>

Furthermore, the price of the language course may not be the only expense involved in learning the language. Teaching materials are normally not included in the price and may cost between 400 and 800 CZK. Furthermore, time spent travelling to language course as well as travel expenses are also important considerations for taking up a language course. Travel expenses to reach the place of language course, especially in regions, may put additional strain on immigrants' budgets. For example, *CIC* has had experience with students from Kolín, a town located about 50 km from Prague, travelling to CFL courses in Prague. The abovementioned students from Kolín stopped attending *CIC* courses and one can only guess why that was the case. However, travel is certainly an additional time and money investment, and may keep potential student from attending CFL courses if they are not available closer to their place of residence.

Furthermore, the time of the course can act as an obstacle to taking up a language course. A lot of courses are offered in the morning, or midday, or sometimes shortly after 5 p.m.. However, most immigrants have to work long hours, and sometimes unusual hours, which means that they may be limited in their choice of courses, and the capacity of language training that exists may not be fully utilised.

Depending on the financial situation of the immigrant and the potential benefit of improving one's situation through acquiring permanent residence, all the above considerations may have an impact on their decision to undertake language training, pass the A1 examination and obtain a permanent residence permit.

The number of people that will qualify for permanent residence in January 2009 and will be required to pass the CFL examination will reach almost 30 000<sup>12</sup>. Most of the applicants will come into contact with the new System of Teaching and Examination of Czech Language for Foreigners (*Systém výuky češtiny a zkoušek pro cizince*). It has already been pointed out by several experts that the new system has several flaws and is generally lacking in transparency. Judging from the current situation in CFL training, the new system will also be expensive and time-consuming to navigate for immigrants. The initiatives of NGOs in providing low-cost CFL courses to migrants are a welcome development and are indispensable in at least partially closing the gap in availability of affordable CFL training poorly anticipated by the new policy. However, the lack of a clearly guided, affordable and accessible system of CFL training based on an analysis on the potential demand for CFL courses and the corresponding capacity of providers less than six months before the new legislation comes into force should be an issue of concern and action for all actors in the policy process.

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<sup>12</sup> Estimate of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports

*The author is presently doing her Master of Public Policy degree at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin.*



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