





**Greetings from Vancouver**  
**On the benefits of a further education abroad**

by Michael Weiss



**Although life-long learning is propagated widely, and further education is part of a teacher's job duties, not too many of us would think about spending several months abroad in order to go to school again, especially at an age of 40 years or more. Even so, nearing my 50th birthday, I decided to do exactly this. Here is what motivated me, what I have experienced, what I consider my benefits to be, and why I think that more teachers could and should take personal advantage from switching to a student's role for a limited time again, especially in a foreign country.**

**My basic motivation: immersion**

Among all reforms that Swiss high schools have undergone in the last few decades, the only one that has never been planned or foreseen by the EDK or any cantonal director of education, turned out to be one of the most successful ones: immersion. The concept of teaching multiple subjects in a foreign language has become so popular among high school students, that nowadays roughly half of them opt for English or (less often) French immersion. In high school, the idea of a «language bath» that was touted to boost

the success of foreign language teaching on elementary and secondary schools, is finally realized successfully.

Being asked by my principal if I would fancy teaching my subjects in English, I stated that I was very interested, but didn't meet the requirements. I could neither provide a Cambridge Proficiency Exam (CPE) certificate, nor proof of having spent two years in an English-speaking country. Since 2017, I have been teaching an immersion class in mathematics and physics, but I have been confined to do so in



German (even in immersion classes, parts of the subjects are still taught in German language). More and more, this was unsatisfying for me.

### **Planning**

In summer 2018, I realized that the excess in my lessons bookkeeping was so high that unless I took a compensation holiday of several months, I wouldn't be allowed to teach my physics power class in applied mathematics the next year. This was the final kick I needed to concretize things. As I was convinced that I would only be able to really focus on the targeted studies if I left my everyday environment behind me, I checked for possible destinations abroad. It turned out that CPE courses were offered by only a few language schools worldwide, and that the International Language Academy of Canada (ILAC) in Vancouver was the only school which could guarantee the CPE course to take place regardless of the number of applicants. So, Vancouver became my only choice, but it turned out to be an excellent one.

Thankfully, I had a lot of support from all sides. My principal didn't hesitate a moment to assure me that the entire costs were covered by school (which, however, were surprisingly modest). I easily found colleagues who agreed to

substitute me with my classes, and we found ways to at least partially cast my LVB duties among the remaining members of the LVB management (actually, however, this is the only part of my normal job that still keeps me busy even 8000 kilometers away from home). Of course, all this would not have been possible without the permission (and encouragement) of my family.

### **Vancouver**

Vancouver is a coastal city in south-western Canada, protected from the Pacific Ocean by Vancouver Island, from which it is separated by the Strait of Georgia. The proximity of both the sea and the North Shore Mountains make it a very scenic city and a perfect motif for postcards. While snowfall is rare in Downtown Vancouver, the summits of the nearby mountains keep being covered with snow throughout the whole year. Of all big Canadian cities, the climate of Vancouver is by far the mildest. However, Vancouver is not known for good weather. Annual precipitation sums up to twice the amount measured in Basel, making waterproof clothing a necessity (at least for bikers like me). The mountains north of Vancouver, and even Vancouver's biggest city park, are covered by (non-tropical) rain forests.

The Metropolitan area of Vancouver is inhabited by almost 2.5 million people with a very multi-ethnic background. More than 40% of the population are Asian, and on public transportation, they often form the vast majority of passengers. Vancouver is a booming town with skyscrapers springing up not only downtown, but also in the centers of the surrounding communities, some of which have more than 100'000 inhabitants themselves. The city is remarkably clean, and with very few exceptions, houses are extraordinary well maintained. People are generally very friendly, helpful and tolerant, unless you do not follow the rules for lining up in queues, which are at least as strict as in Great Britain. The public transport system, made up of buses and the so-called «Sky Train» lines, is good, but not always reliable. Being (as already mentioned) a passionate biker, I preferred to buy a second hand bicycle and use it for the daily 10 km ride from my homestay to school. Many roads have separate bicycle trails, and solid metal frames to safely lock bicycles to are installed all over the city.

### School

ILAC is one of many language schools in Vancouver, but it is the largest, best-known and most successful one. Situated in Downtown Vancouver, it is spread over four buildings at distances of a few hundred meters.

ILAC has to deal with students entering at any time, at any level, and into various programs, including Cambridge, TOEFL, and IELTS. Therefore, every student is rated in an entrance test at the first morning of their arrival. From then on, there is a more extended test on every second Wednesday. Students who perform well on two tests of one level are upgraded to the next level. The tests are structured in the same way as the official Cambridge, TOEFL, or IELTS tests, providing students with a quite precise prediction about how likely they are to pass the official exam. The tests also ensure that all students are upgraded when they are ready for it, regardless of how short or how long this may take. The average class size is 10 to 12 students, at a maximum of 18. The curriculum of each level follows a single textbook whose chapters are essentially independent, which is crucial because, as stated before, students may enter a level at any time. Each chapter includes reading, writing, listening and speaking exercises. Although the use of the internet is encouraged for learning and for doing homework, no electronic devices are allowed during class, at least for students. For looking up words or phrases, there is an Oxford dictionary on every table.

School is from Monday to Friday 8.30 to 1.30 with a lunch break of half an hour at 11.30. In total, this amounts to 30



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lessons a week. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, students choose an elective class out of a broad variety of focusses meeting individual preferences or needs. Extremely motivated students may join additional power classes from Monday to Thursday on the afternoon from 1.45 to 3.15. Personally, I didn't choose this option because rather than being in class for 8 lessons a day, I prefer having more time for self-studies. Even without power class, my 14 weeks of English studies at ILAC amount to a total of 420 lessons, which is almost as much as the total of English lessons given at public schools in Baselland from 5th to 9th grade!

Students at ILAC come from countries all over the world. I met people from Brazil, China, Ecuador, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam, and undoubtedly, this list is far from covering all nations represented here. In spite of that, the use of foreign languages other than English is highly discouraged. Nobody would even think about multilingual didactics. Most students are much younger than I, but at least during class, this is no problem at all. For free time activities, the age difference matters more.

So what makes up ILAC's pedagogical concept? In a nutshell, it's the following:

- small learning groups
- high intensity learning
- power-homogeneous classes
- individual levelling-up
- extremely reluctant use of digital media
- strict confinement to English only
- strong orientation on official tests

In many ways, this concept starkly contrasts with what is considered up-to-date pedagogics in Switzerland. Clearly, a language school cannot be compared to a public school. ILAC primarily addresses young adult students who deliberately choose to improve their English skills, while public school is to address any child. Nevertheless, we must ask why we increase class sizes, cancel semi-class lessons, spread language lessons over five or even seven years, cherish inclusion and individualized learning, consider structured learning as outdated, push the use of digital media, and abhor certificate-based curricula as «teaching to the test», while one of the leading language schools worldwide successfully heads into the very opposite direction. Whatever the answer to this question may be, it is interesting to know that in Canada itself, public schools do not follow the concepts that made ILAC successful. One of my ILAC teachers told me that the education department of British Columbia had decided to cancel grammar from the curricula of public schools a couple of years ago. This literally drove him up

the wall and made him wonder whether it was part of a plot to ground the public school system in order to privatize it at a later time altogether. I remember having asked myself the same question before. Are we both just conspiracy theorists, or is there a real threat?

### Benefits

Whatever scholars may think of the ILAC concept: personally, I take great benefit of it. And be it for learning a language or something else: I recommend everybody to share the experience of leaving everyday life behind for a couple of months and focusing on something that covers their very personal interest. Too often, we spent our lives taking care of others only. I am convinced that we can do so even better if sometimes, we think of ourselves, too.

To be allowed to switch back to the role of a student is another benefit I would not like to miss, especially in this international setting. I talked with young Chinese students about censorship, I learned about what young South Koreans think and experienced regarding physical punishment, I got to know a young Japanese student's opinion about overdone politeness customs in his country, and I listened to young Brazilians confiding to me their hopes and plans for their future. Back home, some of these students could attend my classes, out here, we share the same role with no hierarchic barrier between.

Finally, I realized how much I had forgotten what it is like to write exams. In a teacher's role, nothing is as relaxing for me as watching my classes working on a test, making it hard for me to sympathize with them as they struggle with the problems I give them. Having to go through exams again made me look differently at what they mean to my students and persuaded me that we should do more to avoid situations where students have to pass five or more tests within a week or even multiple tests on a single day. This also is an experience of which most teachers might benefit.

So, if there is any opportunity for you to have some further education abroad and leave everyday life behind you for some time, do not hesitate. We all have only one life.

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