

A Passport to the World

Teaching abroad gives local man a global education

By Lori Russell

When Fred Zenker arrived in Chile last June to teach English to young people in the nation's capital, it soon became clear his students were interested in much more than vocabulary and correct grammar.

"Michael Jackson is very popular in Chile," he says. "They would ask me, 'Do you know the King of Pop?' I also had kids who wanted to know if everyone in America has blonde hair and blue eyes."

He laughs. "When I came back, I noticed all the blondes," he says.

At a time when countries around the world are becoming more politically and economically interconnected, living and working abroad offers insight into other cultures beyond what can be taught in a textbook, newspaper or tourist guide.

After graduating from Wesleyan University in the spring of 2009, Fred wanted to travel and was curious about teaching.

Combining the two seemed like a good option. He applied to Teach Immersion Chile through the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), one of several online sources for international teaching positions.

"I chose Chile because it was the only site that offered the opportunity to work as a teacher's aide," he says. "I wanted to ease into teaching abroad. I thought if I liked it, I could later go to a country where I'd be more independent."

Fred was not new to living and traveling abroad. While in middle school, he toured Europe twice on student trips led by his father, Tim, a high school teacher in The Dalles. He attended three of his four years of high school in British Columbia. During his junior year in college, he studied in Italy and Scotland.

To prepare for his trip, Fred completed a class on teaching English to non-native speakers and earned his Teaching English as Foreign Language certificate—a prerequisite for many teaching jobs abroad.

While the ability to speak Spanish was not required, Fred benefited from the language skills he learned in his high school Spanish courses and while working for five summers in local orchards.

Once accepted, Fred was connected with a Chilean Ministry of Education program, English Opens Doors. Essentially a volunteer program, he received room and board with a host family and a monthly stipend of 85,000 pesos a month—about \$170.

"The stipend essentially pays for your transportation," says Fred, who frequented Santiago's public buses and metro system.

During his six-month stay, he lived in an 11th floor apartment in La Florida, in eastern Santiago, with his host mother, Brígida Pérez. His extended host family—Brígida's daughter, son-in-law and two grandsons—lived 10 minutes away by car.

Fred began co-teaching eight classes, ranging from fifth to eighth grade, at a public school about a 15-minute bus ride from his apartment.

While the neighborhood was known for drug trafficking, he says the school was well-run and the students were eager to talk with their American teacher.

Because the school was unable to provide a classroom where Fred could teach, he was reassigned to a high school within the first month. He worked with 10 classes of ninth- through 12th-graders.

Students in Chile typically begin learning English in the fifth grade, although Fred soon discovered their understanding of the language outpaced their ability to speak it.



After all of their grades were submitted, the Cuarto Medio (senior) classes didn't have much to do except play games and wait for graduation. This photo with Fred was taken after playing a card game with some of the girls. They all have "cerdo soy" (I'm a pig) written on their faces. The penalty for losing a round was to have a letter written on their face in permanent marker.

Photos courtesy of Fred Zenker



Above, English Opens Doors volunteers visit Machu Picchu, Peru, while on break from teaching in Chile. **From left, Melanie Jones, Amy Dorsey, Fred Zenker and Cassy Perera.**

He kept the process fun, using games and activities to promote learning in groups of eight to 15 students.

“You become a kid again when learning a new language,” Fred says.

To improve their verbal skills, he and his students played “Jeopardy” and “All My Friends”—a version of musical chairs. One person completes the sentence, “All My Friends (like, eat, wear).” Those who agree with the statement rush to find a new seat.

During a vocabulary lesson, students drew portraits of each other and labeled the parts of the face in English.

Fred also ran the English Club—an after-school activity. Students celebrated Halloween

by carving pumpkins, sang karaoke and watched “The Simpsons” and other American television shows.

Fred admits immersion in another culture requires both openness and patience. He quickly learned about “tiempo chileno” or “Chile time.”

“If a party is supposed to start at 8, a few people would show by 8:30 and things really got going by 9,” he says.

Teachers frequently were late for class, as were students.

When class did begin, teachers would present the day’s lesson, then give students “free” time to complete an assignment.

While some stayed on task, others would pull out decks of cards or curling irons or

simply engage in conversation with classmates.

During his stay in Chile, Fred cheered for the national team during soccer’s World Cup and the once-trapped miners when they emerged from the ground.

During the school’s winter break, he traveled with other volunteer teachers to Northern Chile and Peru, including the ancient sacred site of Machu Picchu.

After he finished teaching, he explored southern Chile before returning to The Dalles.

One of Fred’s greatest adjustments while in Chile was dealing with the effects of Santiago’s air pollution.

The capital lies in a large bowl-shaped valley flanked

by the Andes to the east and the Chilean Coastal Range to the west.

The stunning geography creates an inversion effect that traps polluted air over the city.

“It was really hard on me,” he says.

A cross country runner in college, Fred found he could not tolerate running along the streets in his neighborhood.

Instead, he tackled the 11 flights of stairs at his apartment building.

Fred’s experience in Chile has led to his next adventure and another entry on his growing international resume: a job in China. This month, he heads to Qingdao City to teach English to college students at Shandong University of Science and Technology.

Unlike in Chile, he will earn a salary and live in campus housing for foreign language teachers.

The one-year commitment includes 10 months of teaching and a two-month school break, during which he plans to explore the country. ■

For more information about foreign teaching opportunities with CIEE, go to www.ciee.org.