

Study Abroad Reflection

It is hard to put into words what it is like to pack up your things and pursue your career in a foreign country at 21 years old. My name is Ashley Evans, and this is my attempt to explain one of the most monumental, life-changing experiences I have ever had—wish me luck. Through Illinois State University and the University of Brighton, I went to England, actually, I *moved* to England. However, I didn't just move to England, I *taught* in England. The idea of this sounds crazy or cliché coming from a small-town girl who has always dreamed of traveling the world but hasn't left the country a day in her life. I, however, wanted to do something to change that. Something out of my comfort zone. Something that would make my 9-year-old self proud of me, and so I did.

It was my junior year and I remember I was sitting in my bedroom on Zoom waiting to hear all of our options for student teaching next spring. That's when it happened, the second the slide came up that showed in a big font: *Eastbourne, England*, I gasped. I didn't think that studying abroad would be an opportunity for me as an education major, so I had pushed those dreams aside to chase my other dream, becoming a teacher. It wasn't until that moment that I realized that I could have the best of both worlds. From that moment on I knew where I would be student teaching, no one could convince me otherwise.

Boarding the plane there was when it all became real, I was really doing this. The first week was filled with so much chaos, excitement, and most of all learning. I learned how to use public transportation, I learned how to navigate my way around a foreign city, I learned how to call restaurants with a foreign number, I learned how to fit in with the locals, and I also had to learn how to lug 2 large ancient suitcases up and down flights of stairs, in and out of trains, and all around the city—what a time to be alive. Although I found myself in moments of struggle where the going was tough or issues arose such as my credit card not being accepted anywhere..thanks Discover. As well as the fact that my local small-town bank provided me with paper money when I exchanged my American Dollars for British pounds. I came to find out that all 300 pounds of paper pound money might as well have been monopoly money with the way cashiers looked at me upon handing it to them at the register. “Not accepted,” “We don't accept this anymore,” “I haven't seen paper money in 5 years, I can't believe you have this!” As I said, the first week was eventful, to say the least. The first week also was the best because I got to meet my host mom Lisa who became one of my best friends. She is remarkable and simply the sweetest soul who deserves the world. She made my stay in England one that was hard to leave.

I felt like my life could not be real when I met my British students for the first time and found out that my school had not one, but two llamas named Star and Luna, a chicken coop, and ducks. It was crazy how unique of an environment I was in yet it felt like home after the first couple of days. My cooperating teacher was so excited and welcoming to have me work with her, which made my experience all the better. It was so interesting to see how educational pedagogy and curriculum differentiates from the United States to England, yet also has similarities. It not only helped me grow as an educator in seeing ways that education is implemented in schools abroad, but it also helped me understand that worldwide there is a shortage of teachers and a fight for better pay and benefits. While I was student teaching abroad there were many scheduled strike days in which my cooperating teacher was striking so my classroom was shut down. I got to get a look into systemic issues with public school funding and teacher treatment at an international level by being a part of the teaching community in England during this time. I was astonished by the content the 4th graders, also known as year 5's, as they say in England, with what they were reading as a class: Beowulf and the Greek Odyssey—these were books that I read my senior year in high school, so it was shocking to have 4th graders reading, summarizing, and analyzing the text with me.

I learned quickly to adapt to British English instead of my traditional American English in that there is some differing terminology for verbs, objects, and academic language. For example, math became maths, swam became swum, the number zero is called not, an eraser is a rubber, recess is playtime, a cafeteria is a hall, etc. It was fun to immerse myself in their culture, live with British people, eat with them, work with them, and teach them. I came to acknowledge that we really aren't much different. Becoming a part of the lives of my students, colleagues, host family, and community members in England helped me see how similar things were and felt to my relationships and the lifestyles of people at home in America. The biggest apparent difference was the accent at first and some of the terminology. However, the longer I stayed the more acclimated I became to their accents and the more I noticed the American accents of my family and friends at home—definitely a strange realization. Living in England was interesting in which anytime I spoke people immediately knew I was not *normal*, I was American. I remember one day a boy on the street asked his friend, “Are they American?” referring to my fellow ISU study abroad students and myself, to which his friend replied, “There’s no way, they are definitely faking.” That was a moment I won't forget because it was funny in that it reminded me of how at home in America, my friends and I would sometimes try to use a British accent in public for fun, and because it sounded so unique, I had never considered the flip side of this scenario of British people doing the same with an American accents.

Besides the occasional hiccups of life and adapting that comes, my life in England was magical. I walked the streets with confidence and gratitude,

confidence of who I am and what I am capable of, and gratitude to all those that made this opportunity possible. Through the weekend excursions with the program hosted by the most stylish and endearing head of the study abroad program, Mary, I built many unexpected friendships with so many people that I will treasure forever. It was crazy to think that we all have been in the teaching program at ISU yet had never crossed paths before, but I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason because we all crossed paths at just the right time, in just the right place, with all the same dreams that led us to where we were: Student teaching abroad in Eastbourne, England.

Having my student teaching experience in England is something that I am proud of, something I love to share, and something that I hope to inspire others to do. It is a journey that will bring you to so many places, experience many new things, meet many new people, and appreciate life in ways not yet seen. My perspective and understanding of the world and people have changed. I feel cultured, I've gained perspective, I've grown, I have adapted, I have flourished, I built relationships, I have traveled, I have appreciated, I have impacted young minds, and I leave feeling empowered. Empowered to do it again, empowered to challenge myself more and to experience and grow more. I love who I am, and I love what this trip has given me, I feel like I can finally see myself and now what I like and things I don't, I know what makes me happy, and what does not, I have developed a new sense in style and taste for art, history, and music, and appreciation for culture.

Upon returning to America, I was welcomed by family and friends all asking me the same compelling question, "How was your trip?" *My trip?* It was *incredible*. Those three words have been the only statement that has come to even try to explain the experience I had. It was truly *incredible*. I don't know how else to say it. They say a picture can say a thousand words so I will leave you with these.







