

Title: My Memorable Experiences as a Fulbright Fellow at University of Michigan, USA

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Last year (2019-2020 session), I was given a Fulbright Fellowship, offered by the US Embassy, Bangladesh. Around 400 language teachers from 50 different countries of the world took part in this prestigious program. I was the only awardee from Bangladesh and worked as a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching **Assistant** (FLTA) at the University of Michigan for two semesters.



The **goal** of the Fulbright Program is to strengthen foreign language **instruction**, while the visiting junior level English teachers who take part in the program can **enhance** their teaching skills and English language proficiency by working and studying in US universities, so while I was there, I taught Bengali to the undergraduate students in the Department of Asian Languages and **Cultures** and developed my own English language and teaching skills. Here, I am going to recollect the things that surprised me most during my stay in the US.

The first thing that amazed me in the US was class size. Each of the classes was very small, usually from eight to fifteen students, although there were a few large classes in social science departments. To begin, I often felt that I was not in a class; it felt like only a part of a class; where had the others gone? However, I **recovered** from this feeling after a few weeks.

The second thing that I liked was the way the students addressed the teacher. U.S. students call their teachers by their last names and use 'Dr.' or 'Professor' to show respect. Whether a teacher is a **lecturer** or assistant professor, they address that person as a professor, and they never use the word 'sir'. That the word, 'sir', was a word used in colonial times, became very clear to me, because some of my **colleagues** discouraged me from using it, whenever I said it. However, in Bangladesh, if someone is not addressed as 'sir', s/he may feel offended.

The third thing that impressed me was the **grading** system. Unlike the Bangladeshi examination system, the university courses in the US are **assignment** based. Students' scripts are examined and graded by one class teacher, **whereas** in the public universities in Bangladesh, we appoint two teachers to grade the same scripts, which in the end makes the grading **process** lengthy. Besides this, the American students at the University of Michigan (and other universities too) can **submit** their assignments and quizzes through an online system. They call their online system 'Canvass'. As a result, due to the outbreak of Covid-19, the grading systems at US universities were not so strongly **affected**. As they already had an online system in place, the classes were held using apps. that had already been developed before COVID-19 began to spread (for example 'BlueJeans'), and students were graded on their online submitted assignments.

The fourth memorable thing was the large number of exciting student events on the campus. For example, the university has an international centre which organizes activities for international students. All of these events often provide free food, snacks and sometimes souvenirs to the students. I went to many such events, ate free food, met new people, and talked to them about their countries and cultures. One such memorable event was the 'International Student Lunch Conversation' to which students would come, grab their lunch, talk to new students and make new friends. The speciality of such events was that anyone who took part could be introduced to people from all the **diverse** cultures of the world. The person sitting next to you would usually be someone from a completely different part of the world to yourself.



The online library system impressed me so much. If I needed to borrow a book from the library, I could order it online. The library officials would find the book and then send it to the reception desk. Then I would get an email that the book was ready to be checked out. This saved me a lot of the time I would have spent searching for the book in the shelves myself.

Even the buses could be tracked online as all the various forms of **transport** had a tracking system. If I needed to go anywhere, I would often check on Google, and I could find the best way to travel, and other information, like the number of buses and their timetables at different times of the day. The University of Michigan also had a mobile app. that could track the buses **accurately**. Surprisingly, I found all the forms of transport, including both the university and the state buses were free for students! All I needed to do was to swipe my student ID when I got on any of the state buses.

During my stay, I was invited to speak at different schools about the culture of Bangladesh. I commonly noticed how the kids in the US asked very **mature** questions. They like to take part in the class discussions, unlike the Bangladeshi students I had taught before, who were very shy about talking in class. On one occasion, I cooked *Khichuri* and served it to the eighth graders after my presentation at Howell Middle School in Michigan. *Khichuri* is a dish made with rice, lentils, spices and is sometimes with chicken or beef. The students were surprised after tasting this dish, and some of them asked me how I cooked it. As they told me, they would try this Bangladeshi cuisine at home or ask their moms to try it, or even watch a YouTube video about how to prepare it! Their enthusiasm was encouraging.

Weather is important in the US lifestyle. The weekends were very lovely in summer and the university students often held big parties on campus. Most of the outdoor activities like picnics, bonfires, and tours to interesting spots happened in the summer. However, in winter the temperature was often below zero degrees Celsius, and we could not go out for outdoor activities, although there were many indoor events. I had never seen snowfall in my life, so when it snowed for the first time in winter, I was so amazed and happy to see the white particles falling from the sky. But these snowflakes make the pavements slippery, and the pedestrians have to be very careful. Otherwise, they could slip and get hurt. I had to buy a pair of snow boots so I could walk outside during the snowy weather. Actually, the snow boots were much heavier than regular shoes, and walking was not that easy!

My experience in the US strongly influences how I see different things in the life of my country now. In our country of Bangladesh, we often depend on others for our necessary daily stuff. For example, many people employ a driver to drive their cars and a maid to cook food or clean their houses. In the US, no-one usually thinks of paying someone else to do these daily chores, because the expense for these services would be as high as any other official **jobs**. For this reason, people in the US drive their own cars, prepare their own food, clean their houses by themselves using vacuum cleaners, and wash their own clothes in their washing machines. Unless they are very wealthy, most ordinary people in the U.S. do not depend on others to do these jobs, because the **labor** cost is just too high.

Indeed, I believe my teaching experience in the US will also make me a more efficient teacher. Now I can devise many more student-friendly teaching activities and use more student-centered **techniques** that I saw the US professors using in their classes. I also believe that my English proficiency has increased from my earlier level due to my stay in a native English-speaking country. I can now give more practical examples of English society and describe different things found in English-speaking cultures more fully in class, and I believe I can now teach English courses to my students in more effective ways.

If you have a strong desire to develop your English and **professional** skills, and if you ever have the chance to take part in a program like this, I can strongly recommend it.

Learning Activities

Vocabulary

All of the following words come from the high frequency Academic Word List. Students should **learn these words first, before learning any other words in the reading text that are new to them**, as this list is drawn from the list of most common academic words in English, as found across all subject disciplines, and these words are more important to know than less frequently occurring words.

accurately affected assignment assistant colleagues culture diverse enhance
goal grade instruction jobs labor (American English spelling) labour (British English spelling) lecturer mature
process professional recovered submit techniques transport whereas

Note: Because this text describes events and experiences the author had in the U.S., American spelling has been used.

Comprehension Questions

1. **Remembering:** Explain, using your own words, the two main purposes of the Fulbright Fellowship program.
2. **Remembering:** Summarize, again using your own words, three things that surprised the author about his experiences in the US.
3. **Understanding:** Why do you think a pair of snow boots would be heavier than regular shoes?
4. **Inferring:** Why do you think students in the U.S. might watch a YouTube video about how to make *Khichuri*?

Critical Thinking Questions

1. **Evaluating:** The author mentions many differences between the US and Bangladesh, but he doesn't say that any of these are 'good' or 'bad'. Overall, do you think the author believes that studying abroad is a beneficial experience for a student of English or not? Do you think he is happy to be home again? What, in the reading text, helped you to answer these questions?
2. **Applying:** If you were to study abroad, where would you like to go, and why? What would you like to study, and why? What kind of experiences do you imagine you might have?
3. **Analysing:** In your opinion, what are the benefits of studying abroad, and what are the disadvantages? Do these things change depending on where you study, and the level of education at which you are studying? Explain why.
4. **Creating:** Imagine you are hosting visiting students from other countries at your school or university here in Bangladesh. What kind of activities, events and support services would you organize to ensure that those people had a positive study abroad experience? Can you imagine any problems that might arise? How would you deal with those problems?
5. **Creating:** Work with a partner and create a 'Welcome to Our School' information brochure for visiting foreign students. Include information about activities, places to go, transport systems, and services and that are available (e.g. the school nurse,

the library) and some photographs. Share your brochure with other people in your class.

Writing Activity

Write between 200 and 300 words about one of the following topics. Try to use the words from the vocabulary list in your writing.

Topic: The advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad

Speaking Activity

Have a debate in English (either in teams, or with a partner) about the following topic.

Topic: “It is better to complete one’s higher level education in one’s own country, rather than studying abroad.”

People should take **either** the affirmative side, and agree with the statement, **or** the negative side, and disagree with the statement. The idea is to try to win the debate by presenting a strong case **for the position** you take. (Whether or not you personally agree or disagree with the statement does not matter.)

Before beginning, make sure to prepare several reasons and examples to support your position on the topic. Try to include the vocabulary from the word list above while speaking.

If you are working in teams, divide up your main points equally between you. Don’t forget to write your points out in note form so you can refer to them while speaking, and practice what you are going to say. You should NOT read directly from your notes.

You could video-record your debate, and watch it again afterwards while reflecting more deeply on your performance. (Think about things like pronunciation, language accuracy, use of vocabulary, the value of your ideas/content.)

For more information about how to hold a classroom debate, please go to...

<http://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/~karchung/debate1.htm>