

During the Spring 2023 semester, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to study and intern abroad in the beautiful city, Seville, Spain. Although it turned out to be one of the most positive and impactful experiences in my life, the idea of studying abroad was not always a source of excitement for me. Well, the idea of it always was enticing, but the realities behind it worried me. I always thought of the amazing experiences I would have, but then would worry about actually going to a foreign country ‘on my own’. Even though I was already 12 hours away from home at Clemson, by sophomore year I had established a friend group and had finally gotten comfortable with my new environment. It was only my second year at Clemson, but due to taking IB Spanish courses in high school, I had completed Spanish classes to the level necessary to go abroad. Despite the anxiety beforehand, I quickly learned all the ways that this experience would benefit me. Even the “negative” aspects like homesickness, loneliness, and difficulty with adapting to a new lifestyle proved to lead to a positive outcome. In general, this experience taught me that stepping outside of your comfort zone is necessary to grow. Try new things, talk to new people, be optimistic, and don’t let fear stop you.

After somehow getting five months worth of clothes jammed into a few suitcases, I was off to the airport where the first challenge would begin. After going through security, checking bags, and arriving at the gate for the flight, I waited around two hours for the airline to announce that the flight was cancelled. I was lucky enough to notice some other students at the gate, and after communicating, we all realized that we were attending the same program in Seville. Instead of letting the stress and emotion get to us, we looked at the situation as a “bonus” day in New York City and an opportunity to get to know each other. Be optimistic!

After our extra adventure, we soon arrived in Seville. I was quick to pick up on several differences right off the bat. First, the overall pace of life in Seville felt more laid back and peaceful. As I spent more time there, I had to adapt to this, and learned to be more present rather than rushing from one thing to the next. For example, at restaurants, the servers do not bring you the check unless you ask for it. This emphasized the importance of meaningful conversations and being present, which I really admired. I also loved how common it was to walk rather than drive a car to get to work, school, etc. Walking not only allowed the community to be more active and healthy, but it also led to the streets being crowded and lively at most times of the day. Many people would stop in the streets to talk, kids would be playing, and others would be crowded around a bar or restaurant. This social aspect of Seville made it easier to interact with others. I made it a goal to go into a store each day on my walk to my internship, or my walk to class, just to talk to someone new. My favorite place to stop was a small bakery, where the same sweet woman would be working everyday. I would always ask her questions, anything, in order to practice my Spanish and to build a relationship with a “local.” After a few weeks, she knew me by name, and she would even surprise me with a few extra breads or pastries in my bag when I left. Even though our relationship was very surface level, I stepped outside of my comfort zone, which allowed me to practice my Spanish and immerse myself into the culture. Talk to new people!

Some of the cultural differences presented challenges. Communicating was surprisingly more difficult than I anticipated. Even with my years of practicing and studying Spanish, I was not prepared to understand the southern, Andalusian accent. I had to work really hard to improve my comprehension skills, especially because of the fast pace of speaking. At times I felt completely lost, which opened my perspective to what it feels like to face a language barrier.

This helped me see the importance of learning other languages and cultures, especially in my future career, so that all patients feel understood and taken care of.

I had a particularly embarrassing moment related to the language barrier the second day that I was able to shadow in the operating room. Because of the difficulty I was having with understanding and communicating with the staff, I was really nervous when they offered me to stand right next to the operating table, next to the surgeon and the operation taking place. Even with my nerves, the medical side of me wouldn't let this opportunity pass me up. A few minutes in, the surgeon looked over and asked me to fix his mask, but all I heard was "mask" due to the language barrier and the physical mask hiding the bottom half of his face. I looked over to the other side of me, scanning the room to look for any mask that he would be referring to, but I was confused. I looked back over at him to realize that his face mask was slightly falling off his nose, and finally understood what he was asking. Embarrassed and mortified, I laughed and explained that I was a student from the United States. Even though I was initially nervous (which turned out to be a valid emotion considering what happened) I was able to have a conversation with the surgeon, introduce myself to him, and create a relationship. Don't let being afraid stop you from trying new things!

Through all of the challenges and experiences I faced during my time abroad, I grew tremendously as an individual. Consciously, I knew my Spanish was improving and that I was gaining valuable experience. But most of my growth came unconsciously, just from being in a new place and adapting to new things. Looking back after the fact, being abroad allowed me to learn independence, confidence, and self advocacy. Because I did not travel with any of my friends from Clemson, I was forced to talk to new people, but also to learn to love my time alone. Additionally, I learned advocacy and the importance of standing up for myself. In my first

rotation at the hospital, I was on the in-patient floor working with the nurses. It was hard at times because many of the nurses did not know who I was, or what I was doing. I made sure to introduce myself and speak up instead of just standing there and waiting for someone to allow me to shadow them or give me something to do. It was challenging because of the language barrier and I felt like I was out of place. After a week or two, I didn't feel like I was getting any beneficial experience, as many of the nurses did not have work for me to do or did not include me in much of their work. I advocated for myself, and went to speak with the internship coordinator, which resulted in changing my rotation, and getting to go back to the operating room. Even when you are in an unfamiliar environment, with people who may be older or more experienced than you, it is always important to speak up and advocate for yourself. The concept of advocacy will allow me to continue to advocate for myself but also to stand up for my patients in the future, especially those who can't advocate for themselves. Being abroad in general helped me learn this, as I was individually responsible for the outcomes of my trip.

In conclusion, studying abroad was a challenging, but rewarding experience. I got to immerse myself in a foreign culture, practicing and learning about others. I faced challenges that taught me about my resilience and strength, especially with the difficult language barrier at times. I grew significantly, and know that the skills that I acquired during this time will serve me well in the future. Try new things, talk to new people, be optimistic, and don't let fear stop you.