

My Super English Journey by Brittney Johnson

This story begins long before accepting the job offer at Super English. My traveling journey began when I studied abroad in college in Spain. It was then that I started developing a passion for cultures different from my own. I realized there was an entire world out there to explore! My eyes were suddenly opened. I have lived and worked abroad ever since I graduated from college 6 years ago. I love learning about and learning from other cultures. Rather than comparing and trying to change them, I have learned to embrace our differences.

So, my name is Brittney. I'm 28 years old, from Texas. I have lived and worked in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Central America, Caribbean and Asia. Prior to last year I had never been to the "real" Asia so when I was deciding on where the next adventure would be, I decided to step into the unknown. Asia always seemed like this distant, mystical, far off land. All of this intrigued me. I love challenges and taking risks....so Asia it was!

My first year in Asia was spent in South Korea. At first, teaching jobs in Korea seemed almost too good to be true. They pay for your flight, visa and accommodation. There were so many schools to choose from. I finally decided on a private language school in Seoul. It was my first time teaching so I didn't know what to expect. I figured I would learn, observe and be trained everything I needed to know, since I had no prior experience. I was wrong. I was given almost no feedback, encouragement or support from my boss. The other 2 foreign teachers gave me some tips, but they were first time teachers as well. I had no way of knowing if I was doing a good job or not. There was no communication system set up. I kept going with what I thought was right. Of course I ended up loving the kids. Unfortunately I can't say the same about the school. The school was run as a business first and a school second. The main thing was to keep the parents happy. The school wanted more kids and more money. But as we all know, no money means no problems. I was thankful for the experience and the people I met in Korea, but 1 year was enough.

Fast forward 1.5 years later. I have been in Surat Thani at Super English for 3 weeks now. I have found SE to be completely different than my school in Korea. But I realized this before arriving to Thailand.

Let me back up. I am planning on attending graduate school next year. So I decided to go teach English abroad again in the meantime. I was open to teaching anywhere: Africa, the Middle East, Europe, South America...wherever. Even though I thought Thailand was beautiful and fun, I didn't really consider teaching in Thailand because I thought the pay was too low. So I looked around and started applying to different schools and different countries. I got a reply from Peter at Super English. We exchanged some emails and as soon as I checked out the website I was very impressed by how "real" Super English seemed to be. All of a sudden, the pay wasn't as important to me. I talked with Peter on Skype. He told me everything I needed to know about SE. I was impressed by how flexible, supportive, fun, laid back and encouraging the school and staff seemed to be. He was completely open, honest and transparent about how things were done at SE. I told Peter that my main concern was the pay. He then explained there are many ways to earn extra money at SE. I can teach extra classes, write stories for the website, and other ongoing and new projects. One thing Peter really stressed was how everything is up to the teacher.

There is not a strict curriculum to follow. No one hovering over your shoulder, but they are there if you need them. The teacher can decide what, how, and how long to teach a topic. Overall, SE has 100% trust and confidence in their teachers.

So I arrived in Surat on a Friday. I was able to meet my fellow teachers and see a bit of the town. My roommate, Dez, took me all over Surat. Everyone was so nice and made me feel super welcomed. They went out of their way to make sure I had everything I needed. It can be stressful when moving to a foreign country and not knowing anything. They have done a great job of taking me under their wings, but also allowing me space to figure some things out on my own. It's been a great balance!

Honestly, I was nervous about how my teaching skills would compare here in Thailand to Korea. We didn't have to think much outside of the box in Korea. And Super English's motto is to give the teacher the flexibility to teach what we want. I knew it would be up to me to create fun and effective lesson plans. But, need not fear. My fellow teachers have been there to give me tips, suggestions, and answer any questions I have had.

I observed the teacher I would be replacing, Victoria, for 2 days. She did an incredible job of explaining and showing Super English's method of teaching. Even though 2 days isn't very much, I think it's best to just jump in with both feet! In life, you learn the most by experience, and the same is true with teaching. I began teaching on Wednesday. Of course I was a little nervous. My morning classes are at the new Thida school. And I must say how fortunate I am to be at this school! It is a new huge building with, yes, air-conditioned classrooms!! I teach 3 2nd grade classes a day, with 55 students and a Thai teacher in the classroom. At first, the number 55 freaked me out! I was used to teaching under 10 kids in a class in Korea. But honestly, it's not as hard as it seems. I'm incredibly thankful to have a Thai teacher in the classroom with me. She helps with discipline, and from time to time explaining things to kids. I was wondering how I would remember 165 students' names! But even just after 3 weeks, I am getting to know each student!

After my morning classes, I teach 2 classes from 4:30-6:30pm at Super English. These classes are much smaller, but smaller does not always mean easier. I was particularly nervous about these classes because the ages have a wide range. I was worried about how to make the teaching relevant for every student in the class. After 3 weeks, I am slowly but surely making progress with these 2 classes. I'm still getting a feel for the class, figuring out personalities and classroom management. I know it will take time to feel super comfortable. I need to be patient and not get discouraged. Teaching is a continuous learning process. I will continue to try to figure out how to be an effective teacher during my time here.

In my short time here I am already loving my students! Thai kids are very affectionate and loving. They also have a lot of energy and show tons of excitement! Teaching with Super English is going to be a completely different experience for me. The way of teaching is opposite from most schools. I have definitely been stretched and challenged since I've been here. But I know it will only get better, and that truly excites me! I know there is a team of teachers and staff behind me, and that is refreshing.

So the journey begins. Throughout my time here in Surat, I will be journaling my experience. I will expand on teaching and living in Surat. I'll include everything from work, living

conditions, everyday life, social life, traveling, eating, and everything in between. Join me in experiencing the “real” Thailand!

Better Every Day by Brittney Johnson

So I've been in Surat Thani 1 month today. And I must say, it keeps getting better and better. I definitely feel much more settled, starting to feel more comfortable teaching, have met some really cool people...things are looking up. I just got back from Khanom, the closest beach to Surat. It's about 1 hour away and it's beautiful!

It's been an adjustment getting used to having 55 students in a classroom at Thida. I teach 3 P2 English Intensive Program classes a day. I see the kids every day for 1 hour. 55 sounds like a big number, but honestly, in the classroom it doesn't feel like that many. I have a wonderful Thai co-teacher that helps with discipline. It's a lot of fun teaching those classes! The kids are well behaved and they like learning English when we make it fun!

I am finding my 2 classes at Super English to be a bit more challenging than my morning Thida classes. It's ironic because my Thida classes are 3 times as big. My first class at SE is SL4 kids, age ranging from 4 years to 13 years old. My 2nd class is SL7, age ranging from 8 years to 16 years old. As you can see, there is quite a wide range in ages, so it's been challenging to make it appealing, fun and effective for everyone. I don't think it's possible to always achieve this. I'm also adjusting to the way we plan our lessons and enforce them in the classroom. But, I can definitely see an improvement in all of these areas, especially in the last few days. One thing that has really made a difference is that I am really getting to KNOW my students. I am getting to know their personalities, what they like and don't like, how to discipline certain students, etc. This makes such a difference! Every student is different, so we have to treat each one differently! I have a stronger connection with my SE students than with my Thida students and that is due to the smaller classroom size. I'm thoroughly enjoying getting to know them!

The main areas I need to improve on are being creative in planning my lessons, totally letting go & being a complete goof in class (at certain times), and how to discipline my older kids. I am used to packing in and covering everything that needs to get taught in class, rather than focusing on making the lesson FUN. But we don't teach like that at SE. We try to make it as fun as possible at first, and let the learning come after...and it WILL come. This is backwards for me...so I am trying to adjust to this concept. If I let loose & be a complete dork in class, then the students will feel comfortable and not be shy or "too cool." They would be more likely to participate if I, the teacher, were doing it too. This is especially true with my older students. They may think they are too old for a certain lesson that the younger students are in to, but if I do it myself and I'm 28 years old, then hopefully they would think it's okay for them to do it as well. I'm getting there.

And I know once I get there, teaching is going to be fun, effective and rewarding. I've already seen results from what I've taught my students in the short time I've been here. They have actually understood and "learned" what I taught them! How exciting!

7 Weeks In by Brittney Johnson

I'm in my 7th week in Surat. Wow, almost 2 months! Time is flying! I must say, Surat is starting to feel more and more like home. I'm thinking about my "other home" (Texas) less and less. I spent last weekend at an amazing beach called Railay (an beautiful island off of Krabi). It's about 3 hours away from Surat and it's one of the most magnificent places I've ever been to. I can't tell you how happy it makes me that these beautiful destinations are so accessible from Surat. Just hop on a cheap bus, an hour to 3 hours later, you are in one of the world's most beautiful destinations.

Victoria observed one of my P2 classes at Thida. I was a little nervous, but I tried to teach exactly how I was without her there. I was really excited about getting some feedback and positive criticism, to make sure I have been on the right path. It's easy to get in a routine and not even realize that you have strayed from what you were taught to do in the classroom. She said that all of the elements are there I just need to refine some things. For example, I should ask more individual questions to students instead of by teams. I should fully demonstrate an activity myself (acting goofy and really get into it) and THEN have the students do it. I should organize group activities by teams, instead of mixing the teams together, and then I can give points to specific teams. But overall, she said I'm doing a great job, just need a bit more organization in the classroom, but that will come with practice and time.

So I'm happy with what she had to say. I really do want to become a good teacher! Teaching is much more rewarding and satisfying when you are doing a good job! When actually see your students LEARNING and having FUN, teaching is a wonderful job!

She is going to observe my Super English SL7 class later this week. I'm excited/nervous about her being in that class. It is my most difficult class. The students are a rowdy bunch. It's hard to keep them actively engaged and quiet. I don't feel like I've found an effective way to manage the class yet. They still need to be disciplined in a way that works. Without that, I don't feel like they are learning as much as they should be. So it has been a bit frustrating for me. I'm used to really disciplined students in Korea. Thai students are a bit more unruly. But I know I can find a way, it can be done! So I'm really looking forward to getting ideas and feedback from Victoria about how to do this. She was their teacher before me and she did a great job with this class. Hopefully I can get there one day.

This is our first full week in over a month. We have had so many holidays and days off. There's only 6 weeks left in the semester. This is when we need to really give it our all and finish strong! As the saying goes at SE, we need to "wow them at the end!" So that's what I plan on doing. I really want to finish on a strong note this semester. I'll keep you updated as to how it's going. Stay tuned...

180 by Brittney Johnson

So there has been a major positive change in the last 2 weeks. My attitude, teaching ability, and overall happiness in living in Surat have all done a 180. About 2 weeks ago, I was feeling pretty down. My older Super English class was giving me a bit of trouble. I couldn't figure out how to keep them disciplined and I was starting to give up. I felt like I wasn't being a good teacher, that the students weren't learning...so what was the point? I didn't want to completely give up because I didn't want to feel like a failure. I was dreading going in to the class, had no energy...I just wanted the clock to make it to 6:30pm. I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. And of course the students could sense my unenthusiastic mood, so they in effect were out of control. It's incredible how one class can effect your entire day, week...life. That class had quickly spiraled into a bad situation and affected other aspects of my life in Surat.

Fortunately, Super English has a team of caring, helpful and attentive teachers. Janet & Victoria could tell it was getting to me and immediately came in to help. First, they started with encouragement, let me unload my emotions, and then they offered advice about how to help.

Victoria came to observe my class. At that point, I still wasn't feeling it She could tell I had no energy, no direction with the class. She came in half way through the lesson to finish it off. We talked the next day about what needed to happen. She still had faith that I could turn it all around,even though I didn't.

So I taught the class a couple more times. They seemed to be a little better at first, but before I knew it, the students went back to their old ways and so did I. I was ready to give up again. Victoria was going to observe me one more time and see how it went...kind of a make it or break it scenario. We met before the class. I didn't have the best attitude. But she somehow got me pumped up and feeling confident. I went in the class and had the best experience ever! There was loads of energy, fun, and learning going on! Victoria was really impressed and so was I! It's amazing how far a positive attitude and a little encouragement will go!

It's been almost a week now and the class is still going strong! Victoria has been working very close with me. She's been giving me ideas but also allowing me to come up with my own. She observed me another time and said she is continuing to see improvement.

Since that class has improved, so has my entire experience here in Surat! Before, when the class was going down hill, I always felt the dread of that class, looming over my head the entire day. I was too down to be social so I withdrew and kept to myself. Now that it is better, my spirits are up, I'm much more social, having fun and best of all, all of my classes have improved!

In the past couple of weeks, I've learned that you make your own experience. It's up to you whether it's going to be a good one or bad one. It's all in your attitude. If you give up too quickly, you could be depriving yourself of an incredible experience. Good things don't come easy. You have to work for them. If you give up, you could be missing out on life! And I'm going to work on not letting one 1 out of a day control my entire life. When you look at the big picture, it's only a minor detail. So why let it get to you and control your emotions? I'm going to try to not sweat the small things. But to also put in everything I have and give it my all! It's now September, less than a month to go before our month off! Must...finish...strong!

Life is Good! by Brittney Johnson

We are now in the month of September. Time is flying! I recently celebrated my 29th birthday. My dad put Victoria, Amy, Janet and me up in The Hilton in Phuket last weekend. It was a great birthday weekend. We somehow got upgraded to VIP status. Believe me, we took full advantage of it.

So we are in our final month of teaching before we let out for break all of October. I can really tell a difference in all areas of my teaching; my approach, attitude, and it's starting to feel more natural. I'm actually enjoying teaching these days. Now that it feels like I'm doing a better job, I can have fun with it. At Thida, my lessons are fun! The kids get into it and my teaching thrives off of that.

At Super English, I have a real bond with the students. I love how affectionate they are. My SL4 class has changed. The older, more advanced kids have moved to another class. This totally changed the dynamic of the class. We got a new student, Pay, who is 4 years old and absolutely adorable. She clings to my side. I'm still not sure if she is speaking Thai or English, she just kind of babbles. But she definitely knows her colors! She yells them out while jumping. So now that most of the students are on the same level, we can do more age appropriate activities with them. Before, we had a mix of older students and younger students so it was hard to make a lesson engaging for all students.

My SL7 class is still a lot better than before. But they have their good days and bad. We are talking and engaging in dialogue a lot more than before. We have been doing fun lessons as well. We've been acting out restaurant scenes. We have some really funny kids in that class so there has been a lot of laughing going on! The class has so much potential to be an amazing, fun, intelligent class. There are a few students that seem to keep the class from reaching that level. A few students have discipline issues and unfortunately that changes the whole dynamic of the class. There is a huge difference with the atmosphere and learning level when those few students are absent.

Life is good! I'm feeling really comfortable with my motorbike now. I feel more productive with it. I can get more things done. I've been spending my weekdays teaching and doing yoga. Yoga is becoming my refuge. I am able to release any tension that I have felt that day. I leave feeling refreshed and alive!

I'm looking forward to this weekend. We will be having an appreciation party/dinner for Victoria. She has been with Super English for 4 years. We are all dressing up in traditional Thai clothing. Then we only have 2 weeks of teaching and we are off for 1 month. I'm looking forward to exploring Thailand during the break!

Two weeks to go! I'm really going to push and give it everything I've got. I'm going to have a different schedule when I get back. It's bitter sweet. I'm going to miss the kids that I won't have when I get back dearly. But I'm excited for a change as well! More to come...