Let’s talk about language barriers

As an undergraduate student in my home country of Poland, I quickly realized that I would have to pack my bags and go abroad if I wanted to advance my scientific career. Since then, I have worked in Israel, Belgium, and Switzerland, and in all three countries my knowledge of the local languages was close to zero. Like many researchers who choose to work abroad, I thought that my decent English skills would be enough for me to thrive. But it has turned out to be unexpectedly difficult. I don’t regret my decision to travel, but those who want to follow this path should be warned: Language barriers exist, and they will probably affect you and your work.

In most of my labs I was the only nonnative speaker, and it was very hard to encourage people to speak English. Unofficial lab communication was typically conducted in the local language, so I was often the last one to hear about new ideas, results, or career development opportunities. I even missed several lab meetings.

My labmates also missed out on my contributions. In one case, a colleague struggled for weeks with a protocol that I had a lot of experience with, but I didn’t realize it. Finally, I noticed that someone had ordered familiar reagents, and I asked into the air, “Hey, is anyone staining on coverslips?” Ultimately, I was able to help with the experiments. But a few words that I recognized would have saved my labmate a lot of time and frustration, and the lab a fair amount of money.

The challenges also extended into the social realm. At happy hours, retreats, and other events, 99% of the conversation was in languages I could not understand. From time to time, someone who had been chatting in French or Dutch would ask me a question in English. I didn’t know the context, so I would respond politely but briefly, unable to build on the previous conversation. As suddenly as it started, the conversation would dry out. I could initiate small talk in English, but I never knew the right moment to interrupt an ongoing conversation. I would occasionally ask, “Could we please speak in English?” but most of the time, this question elicited only silence. Suddenly no one had anything to say. So, I generally smiled quietly until I grew frustrated, excused myself, and left early, feeling totally isolated and excluded.

Of course, you can blame me for not learning the language. But my time was limited, and my priority was my research, not language courses. In addition, my lack of integration with the locals discouraged me from looking for ways to communicate with them. Instead, I found support from other foreigners who felt similar frustrations. We talked about it, but we didn’t see what more we could do. It was natural that the locals would speak their own language. As foreigners, we just had to deal with it.

When I was deciding on a lab for my Ph.D. thesis, though, I realized that I could take matters into my own hands by choosing a more international lab. In my current workplace in Israel, enough of us are English-speaking foreigners that the locals communicate in English too, at least part of the time. This has made a huge difference for me. I enjoy casually sharing tips and tricks with labmates, and I have rewarding personal relationships with many of them.

Yet, the larger problem remains. If I prioritize language when considering future labs, it will severely limit my choices. I also worry that other young scientists going abroad will have the same false assumptions that I did and not take language into account when making career decisions. But it doesn’t have to be this way. I know that it can be an inconvenience for locals to speak in another language to accommodate a foreigner, but in the end, everyone benefits.

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