

By Saman Razavi

Breaking through language barriers

I was sitting in a conference room with my new labmates, eager to engage about the exciting research we were all working on. Halfway through the meeting—my first as a Ph.D. student—I tried to contribute a couple of sentences. Suddenly, the room went quiet and I got lots of funny looks. I was overcome with embarrassment as I realized what had happened. Speaking about water movement in a river basin, I meant to say “upstream” and “downstream.” But instead my brain had gone with a word-by-word translation of the terms in my first language, Farsi: “high-hand” and “low-hand.” This was just the first of many times my brain failed to summon the right English words.

When I decided to leave my home country of Iran to pursue a Ph.D. in Canada, I hadn't expected that communication would be an issue. In Farsi, I was an effective speaker. I had taken English lessons in my 20s and scored well on the English test for university admission.

But soon after my arrival in the English-speaking world, I realized how wrong I was. Expressing myself in Farsi had been effortless, but now I had to be careful and deliberate. I needed to consciously and simultaneously (1) follow the conversation and translate it to my native language, (2) reflect and generate thoughts and ideas in response, and (3) find the right English words and put them in the right order to communicate that response. I had a hard time remaining present and focused in conversations because I was constantly thinking about what I would say next. I gradually turned inward and passive, particularly when surrounded by native English speakers. And I worried about my future. After all, effective communication in English is critical to being included and recognized in many academic and professional environments.

But after another lab meeting a few months into my Ph.D. when I again failed to say exactly what I meant, a simple idea occurred to me. Why not contribute to the discussion in writing, in an email to my colleagues? That small tweak was a game changer, because writing gave me time to reflect and comfortably articulate my points in English. I made a practice of sitting at my computer and putting my Farsi thoughts into English words, taking my time to craft clear sentences with accurate vocabulary and grammar. Over time, this practice helped me simultaneously think and speak in English, as I do in my first language. I grew more comfortable with oral communication, which revived my spirits.



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attention to something that might be seen as a weakness. And at first, the other members of the executive team seemed slightly taken aback. But the dynamic quickly improved. They seemed to become more aware of how they were speaking, and I felt more comfortable contributing to the conversation, even if it meant slowing down the discussion a little bit.

Now, 12 years after I moved to Canada, my language skills have greatly improved—but they're not perfect. In meetings where I am the only nonnative English speaker, the pace of the conversation can still sometimes present a challenge. But I have learned that I can prepare and be open with others about the difficulties I and other nonnative English speakers may experience. With some effort on both sides, language barriers need not be insurmountable. ■

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