

international meetings. When I presented my work, I was unable to network well with foreign researchers, as most spoke only English. So before the conferences started I would choose the lectures that I would attend—those given by scientists who spoke any of the languages I knew: Russian, Hebrew, Spanish and Portuguese. As much as my lack of English limited me, my other languages still were very helpful. This lecture selection tactic led me to meet my future PhD mentor, Osvaldo Delbono, an Argentinian. He invited me to work with him in the United States, which I believe he did because I was able to communicate my scientific ideas to him in Spanish.

It was clear that entering a PhD program in the United States without speaking English was impossible. In addition, entering any US PhD program necessitated a high score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which aims to assess an individual's potential to speak and understand English on an academic level, and on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE)—required for admission to US PhD programs and a much more difficult test than the TOEFL. Therefore, my first goal was to learn English as quickly as possible. I was lucky to have enough support from my mentor, who forbade me from speaking

Spanish in the laboratory. This helped as I was forced to learn words in English if I wanted to communicate with anyone at all. Furthermore, the city where I lived, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, did not have many Brazilians or Latins. This definitely forced me to learn English if I wanted to buy food or get around.

I bought an MP3 player and while doing electrophysiology experiments in the lab all day, I listened to news radio. Moreover, I had an American colleague with whom I would jog at nights after experiments were over, and whom I asked to keep talking to me even if I could not understand a single word of what he was saying. I promised him that if he just kept talking, at some point I would suddenly start to understand what he was saying. And indeed, that is what happened.

These efforts resulted in the rapid improvement of my English. In less than a year I had achieved good grades in the TOEFL and GRE and started my PhD in neuroscience at Wake Forest University under the mentorship of Osvaldo Delbono.

One of the other languages I spoke was important in the work I reported in my first published scientific article. We worked with Grigori Enikolopov, who provided a transgenic mouse called Nestin-GFP. Enikolopov was a

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory researcher who spoke Russian, and my ability to speak Russian contributed to this fruitful collaboration.

Later, in the middle of my PhD studies, I presented our work at an internal departmental meeting attended by Nir Barzilai, a guest professor from Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. The professor liked my presentation and when he came to talk to me I realized that he was Israeli, and so we spoke in Hebrew. This meeting eventually contributed to my meeting my post-doctoral mentor, Paul Frenette.

Finally, returning to Brazil as a professor and starting my own laboratory would be impossible had I not been fluent in Portuguese. Today, a few years into my scientific career, my recommendation is to learn new languages—the more the better—because you could end up working with Argentinians, Americans, Russians, Israelis, Canadians or Brazilians. Such knowledge can open up some great opportunities.

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COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

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