

Dear Josh,

Thank you for your letter! When Mr Thompson passed it on to me, I was surprised and delighted. I am glad “Miscommunicado” resonated with you, both in terms of style and content. I’m a ‘writerly’ person, so I find some kinship with people who also pay attention to word choices, and based on your letter, I would say we are both kindred spirits.

I’m going to respond to what you wrote in order. Firstly, finding the right words and putting them in order has been a lifelong struggle for me! You might think that that would mean I should hate writing, but the opposite is true: as you might have already figured, I love writing. I would say I love communicating more broadly because it facilitates connection. Because I feel what I am saying has some gravity, some level of importance, then I want to work at expressing it well so that the listener or receiver of my message can not only understand it, but also feel cared for themselves. It’s very important that both things happen: the ‘content’ or ‘substance’ of my message cannot stand on its own - it must be delivered in an appropriate ‘vehicle’. That’s one of the reasons why it is vital to have a sense of ‘audience’ (which Mr Thompson likely would have spoken to you about at some point this year!), and to write in a clear style that connects with that audience.

I think what makes me a writer is my level of resilience with communication; I tend to both find ‘the right words’ faster than many people, but also stay at the task longer when the words are coming more slowly. I have a sense that if I don’t figure out the best way to say something, I will return to it later and a better set of words are there, as if they were baking the whole time (I liked your dough metaphor, and it made me want to eat bread!)

Writing or speaking in a different language complexifies the challenge above, but if you are determined (which it sounds like you are), then staying at the task of learning will likely mean you’ll develop some cool strategies over time. You’ll surprise yourself. I learned French while I was in Year 9 at Howick College (and I continued until Year 13, and then did four years of it at university alongside my other courses). I think you can speed up your language-learning capabilities as much as you can speed up **receiving** text in Russian (written, spoken, and in visual media, too), and then **producing** text in Russian.

To learn a language well, a daily habit is essential. Duolingo is useful for basic skills (e.g. learning to read Cyrillic for Russian and then grammar structures), but primarily it’s useful for developing the daily habit. If you can stick to Duolingo for, let’s say, six weeks, then you can probably replace it with something else that gives you feedback like that. In terms of digital tools, I would recommend the website Memrise, and the Anki application (on desktop and mobile). Anki is especially useful for building vocabulary, since all you need to do is find a ‘deck’ of Anki flash cards online (created by other people) and then you can learn those bit by bit. There are YouTube videos to help you figure this all out. The Anki application helps to space out your learning so that you repeat words that you need to learn more (e.g. because you forget or get them wrong). Anki is useful for all sorts of learning (e.g. you can use it to learn concepts in science!), but I think it’s especially suited for language acquisition.

The bottom line with language learning is to persevere. You should expect that you’ll forget things and make mistakes often; your brain actually learns by forgetting (weird, I know) and then re-exposing yourself to what you have forgotten. Adolescence is also an age bracket

that is very well suited to acquiring languages (you might have heard that it becomes harder later on in life - it is true!), so take advantage of the opportunities (and time!) that you have now. It will pay dividends later. Your ability to speak multiple languages will also set you apart from many other New Zealanders, and will help you see the world and people in new ways (hence the glasses metaphors that you referenced!).

As for the question about whether I have felt I had to translate between languages in my head mid-conversation... ALL THE TIME. It's inevitable, really. I *do* think in English mostly, but I have chunks of Romanian (my native tongue) and French that pop in sometimes. I am learning bits of Japanese as well so in the right context, I could have four languages in my head. Sometimes it can get rather 'incoherent' so I have to say things out loud (almost as if I were providing options for a multiple-choice question) and then I pick the path best suited. I go back to what I said earlier about audiences: I will choose the words based on who my audience is. So if my audience can speak multiple languages (e.g. my parents can speak both Romanian and English), then I flick between Romanian and English with them all the time. When I talk to Mr Thompson, we speak English with some kupu from Te Reo Māori.

Your final question: A.I. Big topic! In my workplace, people are encouraged to use A.I. (Microsoft Co-pilot, to be precise) if they can find ways to use it productively. Because of the way that it has been integrated with search engines, I think it's hard to *not* use A.I. But using A.I. to enhance a mental process that you (as a human) are driving is different to using it to, as you say, "write everything for them." I would not encourage anyone to use A.I. as a substitute for their own thinking and decision-making, only as a companion to your thinking. My fear with young people (I know that makes me sound like an old guy haha) is that they don't spend enough time doing their own thinking and instead relegate that thinking to an A.I. so that they can pass tests and therefore pretend they've thought things through. I think it *is* possible to 'appear' that you know something based on what A.I. has told you, but appearances can be fleeting, and for your own sense of mana and esteem, you should try to distinguish between what you know from experience and your own deductions, and what you know from other sources (other people, the news, A.I. etc.)

Whew! Hope that satisfies your curiosity - thanks for sharing your thoughts, analogies, questions and well wishes! I return them to you; all the best for 2025's end and 2026 as well!

Warmth,
Cris Cucerzan

A former Howick College student (I was in year 9 in 2005!)