

Multilingual Notes as a Tool to Understand Super Dense Readings

Su Yin Khor

Su Yin Khor investigated her dual-language note-taking method that emerged from her struggle to understand class readings. What she discovered was that her notes were more than multilingual scribbles on complicated theories and tricky terminology.

The hours before my Wednesday night class were more or less the same for the majority of my first semester as a Master's student. I was constantly anxious and worried. The readings for this class redefined the word dense, and preparing for it was difficult. The hours leading up to my class at 5:30 p.m. were agonizing, and Mrs. Time would constantly remind me that time was slipping away.

"It's 3:30, you better start now, Su Yin!"

"It's 4:45, so you should eat before class, if you ever complete the readings..."

"Oh, hey, look at that, it's 5:30, good luck in class!!!"

With Mrs. Time sitting on my shoulder, I contemplated dropping out of school—that's how freaked out I was *every single Wednesday*.

Sorry, I lied.

I was actually freaked out pretty much every day of the week, not only Wednesday, because the majority of the readings during my first semester were incredibly dense. Every page was crammed with complicated words, difficult

theories, and references to research by unfamiliar scholars. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to understand them, which would prevent me from actively participating in class. It made me go bananas, and I'm sure that you know what I'm talking about. I mean, I'm studying linguistics, *the scientific study of language*, and TESOL, *teaching English to speakers of other languages*, so when I was introduced to concepts like CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory, a way to look at writing and activities involved in the composition of texts), a bunch of complicated terms, and theories that all ended with an *-ism*, my brain froze.

To be honest, the readings scared me. They intimidated me, and this really did a number on my self-confidence. You're probably thinking that it should've been a piece of cake for a graduate student, but let's reconsider that answer. If people tell me that they're in graduate school, I will automatically think, "Oh, you're a smart cookie! School must be easy for you!" However, after I say that smart-cookie line, I remember that people that I've met say the same things about me. If anything, it's hard. I'm expected to understand all the readings pretty quickly and participate actively in class. Since I couldn't get away with not reading them, what did I do? Could I just pick up a SparkNotes study guide for every book I had to read? Nope, not possible.

Facing My Fears: Creating Hybrid Notes

You know that feeling when you have nightmares where someone is after you, and you try over and over again to get to a safe place, but nothing happens? It was sort of like that. It felt like I was stuck in a maze where the readings were out to get me. So, what did I do to get out?

Well, I started taking notes in two languages in order to deal with this sticky situation. I was born and raised in Sweden, but I learned English in school, so what emerged when I was feeling overwhelmed was my note-taking method that involved meshing Swedish and English. I incorporated the use of Swedish in different ways depending on how challenging the readings were. I would start writing something in English and switch to Swedish or from Swedish to English. Occasionally, I'd translate sentences from English to Swedish. Sometimes, using Swedish was a conscious choice, and sometimes it wasn't.

At first, I was hesitant about resorting to this method when things got rough. *Why use two languages to understand the readings? I'm in an English-speaking environment, use English!* It was a debate that I had with myself from time to time, and it seemed like combining Swedish and English was purely a way to survive my first semester of graduate school. However, if we look deeper, my notes reflect more than my struggle with understanding the readings. Before we discuss my notes, let's talk about some core concepts that will provide you with contextual information. They will help you understand my notes, and the purpose of this article.

Translingual Practices: Shuttling Between Different Languages and Varieties

Why are our literate practices important? Who cares about me writing in two languages? Why write about some mundane activity like note-taking? Well, look at the kind of writing, or genres, that you engage in. Would you throw in ☺♥🎵 in an academic genre like a history paper? Probably not. Just like you know that I wouldn't write this article in all caps BECAUSE YOU'D THINK THAT I WAS YELLING AT YOU, WHICH I'M NOT, BUT YOU CAN'T HEAR ME SO YOU WOULDN'T KNOW THAT, and you know this because your prior experiences with writing tells you that this isn't how you write to people unless you're mad at them.

Your previous experiences have constructed your **antecedent knowledge**, in this case, your prior knowledge about writing. In fact, with every writing experience, school-related or not, your antecedent knowledge develops, so it's changing and growing even at this moment. It tells you how to write appropriately in different writing situations and contexts. You already know the difference between informal and formal writing, like tweets and forum posts compared to newspaper articles and research papers. Even if we're not always aware of the existence of our antecedent knowledge, it's still something that we bring with us to every writing situation.

Mixing two languages in writing is called *code-meshing* (while *code-switching* refers to the mixing of codes in speech). “Code” refers to words and phrases, and “meshing” is simply to mix. Code-meshing is a big deal in something called *translingual writing*. To figure out what this actually means, I did some research. Here is what *Collins English Dictionary* has to say about *trans-* and *lingual*:

Trans-

across, beyond, crossing, on the other side

⇒ ■ transoceanic, ⇒ ■ trans-Siberian, ⇒ ■ transatlantic

Ligual

(*rare*) of or relating to language or languages

When we “translingual” our writing, we bring together two or more languages to make sense of something that we might not have fully understood if we had only used one language. After looking up the actual meaning of “translingual,” my own literate practices make more sense. I'm not putting together sentences willy-nilly by using random words from two languages—I'm code-meshing. Using all of your linguistic resources to figure stuff out doesn't

mean that your language abilities are insufficient—they're more than sufficient. Every piece of writing that we create contains traces of our life experiences, writing experiences (good and bad), and our knowledge of language. We are who we are because of our experiences, and this is what I can see in my notes: pieces of who I am bleed into every piece of writing that I have composed.

Even if you “only” know English, this translingual writing practice relates to you too because speakers of one language also code-mesh. Languages are flexible, and they allow you to play around with words and phrases. Remember when I wrote everything in all caps and threw in emojis? You knew that this article wouldn't be written like that because you know the difference between informal and formal English. When you message a friend on Facebook, do you start off the message with “Dear X, the weather is lovely today, care to join me for a walk?” and sign it? You probably don't, and if you do, maybe you're just trying to be funny. The point is that you know how to modify the written (and spoken) language to make it appropriate for different writing situations, which also means that you know how to play around with words and mesh different codes. We know how to adjust the way we write, and we do it consciously (maybe for a desired effect) or subconsciously all the time, whether we use one language or two. This brings us to the next discussion: *language varieties*.

The Soda-Pop-Coke Conflict: Language Varieties

As I discussed in the previous section, we're all translingual writers. Our translingual practices reveal how we use all our linguistic knowledge to shuttle between linguistic contexts. In fact, the number of languages you speak is irrelevant, and that is because we all know different varieties of languages. Although you might know one language, you consciously or subconsciously alter it to fit your audience when you write and talk. This knowledge is incredibly important and valuable because it's part of who you are.

In linguistics, “variety” refers to variations of a language, like varieties of American English. These are not deviations, or incorrect forms, but *specific* forms of a language with their own particular rules and patterns. This includes regional differences but also differences among social groups. To illustrate this better, think about the varieties that are spoken in other states, or areas. Even better, think about the soda-pop-Coke conflict that severs the bonds of even the strongest friendships. I say soda, but what do you say? Pronunciation is also an area filled with conflict. How do you pronounce “crayon”? What about “aunt”? Do you say “y'all” or “you guys”? Would you like some “syrup” with your pancakes? I'm sure you'd get different answers if you asked your friends to pronounce these words.

We can also look at how different groups of people communicate with each other. *What words, phrases, and expressions do they frequently use? What grammar is*

distinct to their group? For example, younger generations tend to use abbreviations (such as LOL, OMG, etc.) and emojis to express themselves. Other examples would be African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Spanglish, or the English variety that my parents speak, Malaysian English, Manglish.

Just like you, I also know different varieties of different languages. As you will see, the linguistic knowledge that I have is part of my identity, just like your linguistic knowledge is part of your identity. My parents are Chinese, and they were born and raised on a Malaysian island called Penang. They moved to Sweden, so that's where I grew up. I learned to speak a variety called *Penang Hokkien* as a child, and it's a Chinese dialect that's very specific to Penang. I'm sure you've heard dialects like Mandarin and Cantonese on TV, but my dialect is so different that I can't understand them, even though Hokkien originally comes from China. These varieties have developed in different ways to the point that they must be distinguished from each other. There are huge groups of Chinese, Indian, and Malay people in Malaysia, so we borrow words from each other. Since Malaysia used to be a British colony, English words are also thrown into the mix.

In addition, I grew up in a neighborhood with a large immigrant community in Sweden, so I learned a “non-standard” variety of Swedish, known as *Shobresvenska*, as well as “standard” Swedish. *Shobresvenska* is named after *shoo bre*, literally *hi* or *hi brother*, a common greeting among younger immigrants. This variety borrows many words from Arabic and Turkish, but also English, and a few other languages. This shows that the linguistic knowledge that we have is shaped by the linguistic environment that we're in, and in turn, it shapes us and our identity. Let me demonstrate this by showing you a few examples of “standard” Swedish and *Shobresvenska*. Have a look at Table 1, and pay attention to the words that are underlined, in **bold**, *italicized*, or a *combo*.

Table 1. Comparison between English, “standard” Swedish, and *Shobresvenska*.

English translation	“Standard” Swedish	<i>Shobresvenska</i>
<i>Example 1</i>		
A: Did you like <u>the movie</u> ?	A: Tyckte du om <u>filmen</u> ?	A: Gilla du <u>filmen</u> ?
B: Yeah, it was really <u>good</u> .	B: Ja, den var jätte <u>bra</u> .	B: Aa den va fett <u>bra</u> .
<i>Example 2</i>		
I have a lot of <i>money</i> .	Jag har mycket <i>pengar</i> .	Jag har fett med <i>para</i> .
<i>Example 3</i>		
Come on, <u>hurry</u> ! We have to go !	<u>Kan du skynda</u> ! Vi måste gå !	<u>Aboo jalla</u> ! Vi måste gitta !

It doesn't matter if you don't know Swedish, as I'm sure that you can see that the words are different. You might also see that Shobresvenska is different in many ways, but the grammar is either similar, or the same as "standard" Swedish. Perhaps more importantly, the point of this chart was to show you that I'm influenced by the languages and varieties that I know (whether they are similar or very different), and the people around me, just like you are. This also influences other aspects of my life, like the writing that I do. Just to clarify, *fett* literally means *grease* in Swedish. *Para* was borrowed from Turkish, as well as *aboo* and *gitta* (but in another form), but *jalla* is Arabic, and I use all of these words frequently.

Regardless of whether you know one or five languages, you still have the knowledge of how they're used in different writing (and speaking) situations and contexts, and this is important knowledge. It might seem trivial, but it's not—it's part of your antecedent knowledge that helps you navigate through different writing situations. For example, based on my own writing experiences, I wouldn't write a research paper using Shobresvenska, as it's not appropriate for the situation and that particular genre, but when I write my lecture notes? Sure, that's no problem. It doesn't matter if I use formal or informal Swedish in my notes. It doesn't matter if I throw in English either, because language use in the genre of note-taking is more flexible.

Now, I will go ahead and show you what my notes look like since you have some background information on language varieties and translanguaging writing. The notes come directly from my notebooks, and although you're not expected to read them, I just want to give you a peek into my brain and see what the notes look like. I've provided an English translation under each image so you know what the notes say.

My Hybrid Notes

I have no intricate system for structuring or organizing my notes. I just use regular notebooks and regular pens in black or blue ink. I don't think about grammar or spelling, which is why my notes are incredibly messy and terrible, and borderline impossible to read.

I have noticed that certain situations prompt me to use Swedish, or mix Swedish and English, and I have identified some factors that seem to influence these practices:

1. Unfamiliar information vs. familiar information
2. Dense material vs. accessible material

These factors can overlap in different ways. For example, an article can contain unfamiliar information but be accessible, but it can also be familiar but dense, so there's a number of situations where I turn to using Swedish. Let's start with the unfamiliar vs. familiar information.

Unfamiliar Information vs. Familiar Information

I think that 80% of my readings were unfamiliar, but I will show you the notes that I took during orientation for new teaching assistants. During this orientation we were introduced to genres, CHAT, and the Writing Program's approach to writing, which I found to be very confusing. Everything that I knew about writing had been thrown out the window. In my mind, genres referred to books and music, and CHAT? I had no clue. Now I can see that my notes also contain traces of confusion, and portrays my struggle with processing new information.

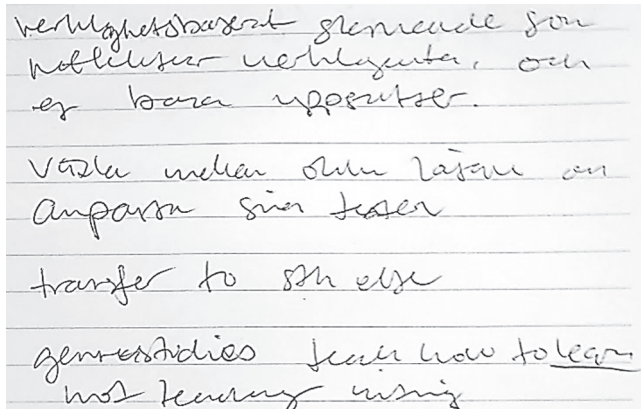
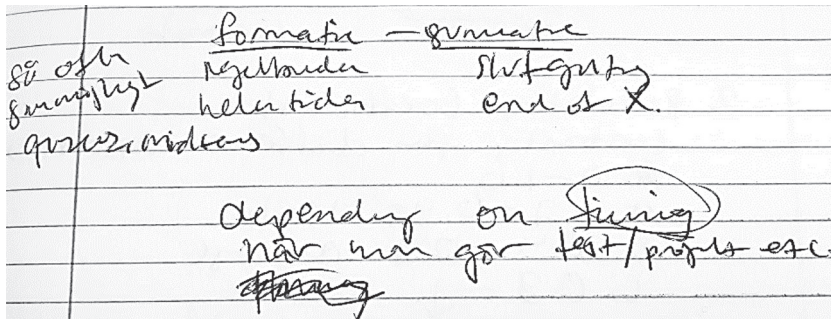


Figure 1. Notes on Genres, CHAT, and the Writing Program's Teaching Philosophy.

“Verklighetsbaserat skrivande som reflekterar verkligheten, och ej bara uppgifter. Växla mellan olika läsare och anpassa sina texter. Transfer to sth else. Genre studies teach how to learn, not teaching writing” (English translation of Swedish text: Based on real-life writing, and not just assignments. Switch between audiences and adapt our writing.)

The Writing Program's genre/CHAT approach to writing was completely unfamiliar to me, and I had a hard time understanding it. I was never taught how to think about writing from a CHAT/genre perspective, so this completely re-programmed my understanding of writing. Genres were incredibly confusing to me, and in order for me to process all the information, I had to write it down in Swedish. I couldn't understand it at all in English. As you can see, I also switched from Swedish to English (“transfer to sth else . . .”) because this part was easier to understand, so it wasn't necessary to write it down in Swedish.

Another unfamiliar concept that I encountered concerns testing. In my testing/assessment class, we discussed different ways of testing and assessing students who are learning their second language. The world of testing was a lot more complex than I thought. Have a look at Figure 2:



	<u>Formative</u>	<u>Summative</u>
<i>Så ofta som möjligt, quizzes, midterms</i>	<i>Regelbunden</i>	<i>Slutgiltig</i>
As often as possible	Regularly	Final
	<i>Hela tiden</i>	<i>End of x</i>
	Constantly	End of a semester/year
<i>Depending on timing när man gör test/project etc.</i>		
Depending on timing when assigning tests/projects etc.		

Figure 2. Notes on Testing and Assessment.

Talking about testing by using technical terminology was challenging. We had to learn a lot of technical terms to understand the material, and after a while, it became overwhelming, so I had to incorporate Swedish so I could understand some of them. It helped me understand the material better, and I became more familiar with the terminology by using my own words to explain them, rather than reading the textbook and copying the text.

I have shown you two examples of what my notes could look like when I try to deal with unfamiliar material. The unfamiliarity of the material scared me, and I had to do anything I could in order to learn. In the next section, I will show you how my translanguaging practices helped me when I dealt with dense readings.

Dense Material vs. Accessible Material

When it came to processing material that was found in the land of theories, the overall difficulty, no matter how familiar the subject was, made it so

challenging that I had to rewrite and translate words and sentences. I also had to look up the basic information online in order to understand them. Sometimes, I worried so much about my lack of knowledge and experience that it prevented me from learning, and it was hard to come out of that vicious circle. I didn't want to fail graduate school, and I experienced a lot of anxiety during my first semester. So, I forced myself to put on the pants of curiosity and be brave.

The first image of this section is about CHAT, and my attempt at explaining each CHAT convention using my own words. Let's have a look at Figure 3:

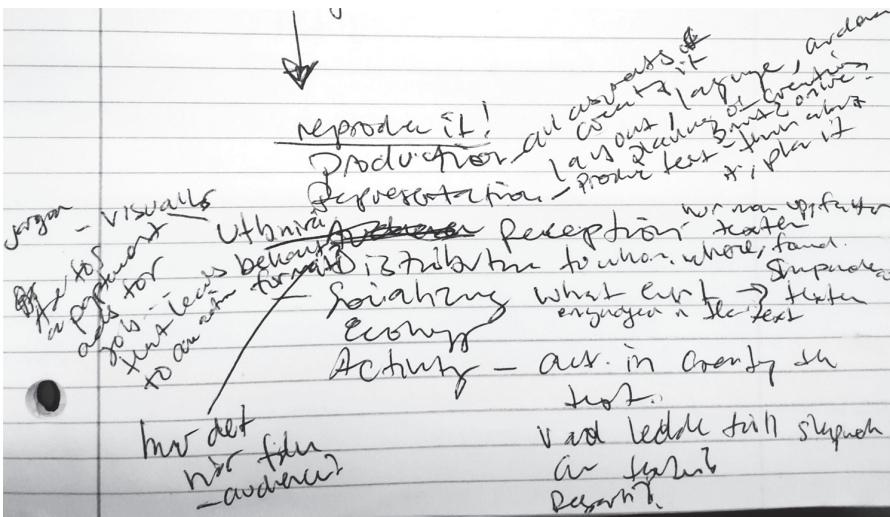


Figure 3. Trying to Explain CHAT.

Reception—hur man uppfattar texten. How the audience perceives/understands the text.

Activity- allt in creating the text. Vad ledde till skapande av texten?
Research? (English Translation of Swedish text: Everything that involves creating the text. What leads to creating the text?)

A lot is going on in Figure 3. I thought that it was hard to understand the readings because the authors who explained CHAT used equally dense terminology and words to explain it, so reading the articles on CHAT didn't help me understand it at all. They just made me confused. To me, the hardest conventions are reception and activity because they overlap too much with the other conventions. Representation is difficult too, but somehow I managed to explain it in English. (I still look up reception, activity, and representation every time I do something that is CHAT-related. *When will I learn???*)

In my “-ism class,” we asked our professor if he could talk about Marxism, and let me tell you, this was TOUGH. It was like some kind of intellectual boot camp. Personally, the readings from this class were super dense already and also unfamiliar. In Figure 4, you can see that I used Swedish quite frequently because there was too much information I had to write down, while also trying to process what my professor was talking about, so I could keep up.

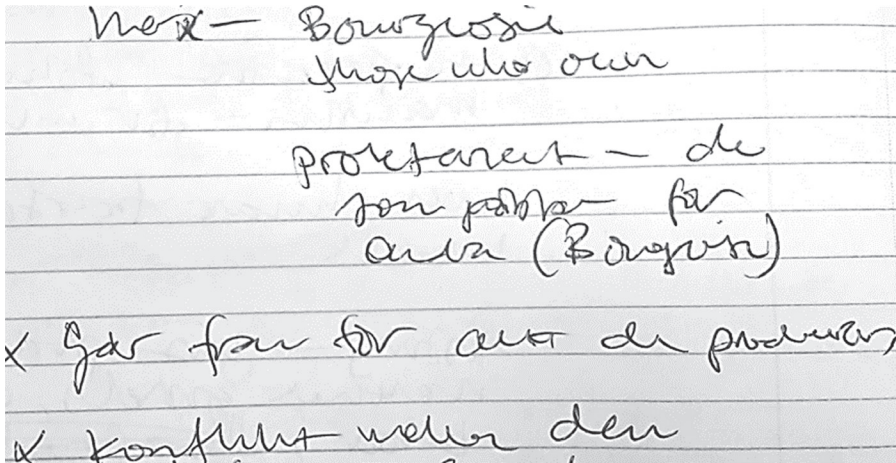


Figure 4. Trying to understand Marxism.

Marx – Bourgeoisie those who own.

Proletariat-de some jobbar för andra (bourgeoisie). (Proletariat- those who work for others.)

Går fram för att de producerar. (Develop/move forward because they produce.)

Konflikt mellan dem. (Conflict between them.)

What is going on here? My professor talked about Marxist theory, which I didn’t know in-depth at all. I only had some surface knowledge of this theory (if you could call it knowledge, hmm . . .), and plowing through the definitions of the terminology was definitely a challenge, so I switched to Swedish and threw in English in some parts of the notes.

The Sum of the Cardamom

Kidding.

That was a literal translation of a Swedish expression, *summan av kardedumman*, which means *bottom line, the point is*, which is what I will get to now.

After discussing my own note-taking, the sum of the cardamom is that knowing varieties of languages and/or being bilingual provides the speaker with a great source of knowledge that they otherwise would not have. I can't speak for everyone else, but in my case, knowing multiple languages has allowed me to draw from different resources to help me process all the –isms and terminology that were thrown at me.

Knowing different varieties, and knowing English as a second language, has helped me in my academic life. Rather than being seen as deficiencies, I recognize that I have this wealth of knowledge that I can draw from to help my learning process and everything else that requires an extra boost from my brain. If there is anything that I want you to remember or learn from this article, it is this: No matter what language or variety you speak, whatever your first language is (or second language, if you happen to know one), whatever your proficiency level is—take advantage of that knowledge. It will help you in so many ways in life and in school.

Works Cited

“Lingual.” *Collins Dictionary Online*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lingual.

“Trans-.” *Collins Dictionary Online*, www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/trans.



Su Yin Khor is a Master's student in linguistics and TESOL, and is mainly interested in second language acquisition issues. She snacks a lot.