



## Developing Agency and Translingual Literacy Through Games

by [Magdalena Madany-Saa](#) and [Jason Litzenberg](#)

In today's globalized world, transnational living patterns are commonplace. Mobile, transnational families have living arrangements spread over two or more countries while maintaining the language skills for multinational communication (Hirsch & Lee, 2018). The children of transnational families develop multilingual literacies in which they use diverse linguistic resources and modalities.

We, the authors, identify as multilingual researchers who are part of a transnational family. Magdalena was born and raised in Poland, lived more than 14 years as an adult in a Spanish-speaking country, and has resided in the United States for almost 5 years. Her professional socialization for almost 20 years has been in English. Jason was born and raised in the United States; he has lived more than 10 years outside of the United States (namely, in Ecuador, Germany, and the United Arab Emirates) and considers himself fluent in German with emergent Polish and Spanish. Other family members of the immediate household include Magdalena's teenaged daughter and preteen son. We promote translingual practices in the home, a practice that generates unique opportunities for the children's linguistic and communicative development.

### Familylect

In this article, we focus on the concept of *familylect* (Søndergaard, 1991)—that is, the familial idiosyncrasies that distinguish a family's members from other equally proficient speakers. The field of Family Language Policy studies encourages parents, teachers, and social workers to support the maintenance of multilingual familylects. Family Language Policy work includes a range of familial relations, including transnational and nontraditional families, such as remarried, single, LGBTQ, and foster configurations, among others.

The following descriptions demonstrate how children use their multilingual resources within the familylect to express agency, or, more specifically, how these participants negotiate and take ownership of the narrative in which they are engaged. The situations originate from the recording of an afternoon session of family games intended to encourage translingual practices.

## Expressing Agency Through Games

The session consisted of a set of four specially designed communicative games, the last of which was a collaborative oral story with self-sourced objects. In this game, each participant (the two authors as well as May, 14 years, and Jim, 11 years) brought three different self-sourced objects to the table, then subsequently took turns incorporating their objects into the collaborative story. In delayed interviews (approximately 18 months), all participants expressed enjoying this activity the most.

During the game, the children expressed agency in several ways.

### Language Choice

One of the first expressions of agency was language choice. For example, family members expressed the items they had brought to the table in the language of their choice, as follows:

Player	Item Brought	Choice of Expression	Language
Magdalena	scissors	<i>nożyczki</i>	Polish
	umbrella	<i>parasol</i>	Polish
	Easter egg	<i>pisanka</i>	Polish
Jason	nail clipper	nail clipper	English
	hair band	hair band	English
	coaster	coaster	English
May (14)	bottle of water	water	English
	lighter	<i>encendedor</i>	Spanish
	jam	<i>marmelada</i>	Spanish
Jim (11)	honey	honey	English
	salt	salt	English
	a strawberry	<i>Señor Fresa*</i>	Spanish

\* *Señor Fresa* translates to “Mr. Strawberry,” a familylect nickname for Jason.

In addition to the agency of language choice, Jim also expressed agency through the familylect term *Señor Fresa* by (1) indirectly challenging the guidelines that required everyone to bring an object to the table, and (2) maintaining the use of *Señor Fresa* even after his mother corrected him several times with *fresa* (without *Señor*).

### Negotiation

Another example of agency occurred when the eldest child, May, took the initiative to introduce a new idea and change the form of the narrative from ordered to random. She seemed initially uncertain, seeking her mother’s approval by looking at her while explaining her suggested revisions to the rules. May argued that this innovation would increase players’ attention and create more dynamic interactions; she gave an example of how the narrative would unfold and explained the rules for choosing the next storyteller. She concluded with a direct question regarding her mother’s approval; Jason and Jim accommodated Magdalena’s positive uptake of the suggestion to change the narrative’s modality.

Through May's agency, the direction of the game and the ensuing activities were altered, and the parents supported the suggestions. Though this event did not noticeably employ multilingual resources, the multilingual game time opened a space for negotiating a co-constructed translingual activity.

## **Storytelling**

The storytelling process itself was another opportunity for expressing agency. The collaborative turn-taking allowed for the incorporation of body language, meaning-making, and the expression of affect. Jim was a creatively agentive narrator. As was later discovered, he not only created an alternative storyline by interacting with the camera throughout the recording, but he also assumed opportunity to define both the protagonist and antagonist of the narrative. In naming the antagonist, he transformed a minor character who had been introduced into the narrative by his sister into a vile adversary, and through his agency of simultaneous, wordless interaction with the camera, he constructed a secondary storyline. Though expression of this agency would not be possible without participant awareness of the camera, it nevertheless influenced post hoc interpretations of the storyline and events of the game.

## **Communicative Context**

The recording demonstrates the children's comprehension of and participation in the various parts of the story narrated in English, Polish, and Spanish. Though they primarily used Spanish between them, the majority of their contributions were in English because, as they stated in the delayed interviews, they wanted to accommodate Jason's emergent Spanish and Polish. In this way, the children demonstrated awareness of the communicative context and expressed agency through their linguistic choices. Magdalena and Jason, on the other hand, expressed agency by choosing to scaffold their contributions through conscientious speech and body language. The children and the parents had differing approaches to achieving the same communicative goal.

## **Familylect and Translingual Practices**

The children's agency can be summarized in terms of accommodating other speakers, proposing new rules, (re)shaping the storyline, and creating alternative storylines. Our family's familylect demonstrates translingual practices and indexical cultural and social cues for objects and people; it inspired storylines and influenced lexical choices throughout the narrative. This familylect is both unique and time-constrained; during the delayed interviews, we realized that we have new indexicalities. For example, though English, Polish, and Spanish still compose the base of our translanguaging, Jim recently started to learn German; he frequently seeks to incorporate that language into interactions with Jason, and *Señor Fresa* has become less of a presence as new nicknames have replaced the old. Nevertheless, the situations described here demonstrate how a familylect augments family bonds (Van Mensel, 2018).

As parents who are both language pedagogues and researchers, we are perhaps more conscientious of creating and encouraging spaces for translingual practice than many other parents. We may be more able to recognize how translingual family games can foster children's

agency in the development of transnational identities, strengthen intrafamilial relations, and position the uniqueness of our familylect as a source of pride. Transnational and multilingual families should understand the benefits of translanguing practices, and educational professionals should encourage and support translanguing practices among such families.

## Other Games for Translanguaging

Translanguing games can take numerous forms beyond the storytelling format of the game described here; indeed, with little modification, even popular card and boardgames can be a catalyst for translanguing interaction. For example:

- The rules of *Scrabble* could be adapted to allow for translanguaging when the components of the familylect have overlapping alphabets.
- Games such as *Uno*, *Scattergories*, or charades can be easily adapted to encourage flexible usage of players' translanguing resources.
- *MadLibs* texts may be completed in any language players choose.

Games can provide a break from established familylect patterns, promote creativity, and develop child agency in Family Language Policy. Pedagogues can encourage transnational parents to utilize the entirety of their linguistic repertoires through family games. Family Language Policy can and should inform regional or national policy makers and, consequently, social workers in appreciating translanguing practices of families who express their transnational identity through their familylects.

## References

- Hirsch, T., & Lee, J. S. (2018). Understanding the complexities of transnational family language policy. *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, 39(10), 882–894.
- Søndergaard, B. (1991). Switching between seven codes within one family—a linguistic resource. *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, 12(1-2), 85–92.
- Van Mensel, L. (2018). 'Quiere Koffie?' The multilingual familylect of transcultural families. *International journal of multilingualism*, 15(3), 233–248.

---

**Magdalena Madany-Saa** has been an English teacher educator for more than 25 years. She worked in Ecuador training in-service teachers between 2004 and 2016. Nowadays she is based in State College, Pennsylvania, USA. She is a PhD candidate and TESL instructor in the College of Education at the Pennsylvania State University. Magdalena's research interests are language policy, translanguaging, and decolonial pedagogy.

**Jason Litzenberg** is director of the Intensive English Communication Program and associate teaching professor of applied linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University. He is fluent in

*English and German, with basic knowledge of Polish and Spanish. His research interests are program administration, language policy, linguistic landscape, and English as a lingua franca.*