STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVII, 4, 2022, p. 275 - 294
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2022.4.14

MAPPING LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH EMOJIS: FROM PHATIC COMMUNICATION TO IDIOMS AND FLASH FICTION

Ioana MUDURE-IACOB[1]

Article history: Received 31 July 2022; Revised 12 October 2022; Accepted 5 November 2022; Available online 20 December 2022; Available print 30 December 2022.

ABSTRACT: ***Mapping Language Learning with Emojis: From Phatic Communication to Idioms and Flash Fiction.*** By roaming around digital resources in search of a customised learning approach, language learners often identify as netizens accustomed to a coded Internet language which is rarely juxtaposed with the language taught in the ESP classroom. To keep pace with shifting trends in online communication, teachers often need to expand the discursive membership by empowering learners to turn from users into content creators. By referring to the potential of using emojis in the framework of speech acts, the current paper aims to indicate directions of embedding emojis as social marking tokens and instruments of developing language and digital literacy skills in the foreign language class. The process of embedding emojis in language teaching stems from the integration of emoji as markers in the teaching of phatic communication, to reinforce the locutionary and illocutionary act of speech. Moreover, emojis can be used as an extension of teaching idioms, whereas the illocutionary and perlocutionary function of emoji is explored in interactive vocabulary practice tasks or within gamified sequences. Eventually, using emojis as perlocutionary acts in language learning is applied to storytelling as a mechanism of developing a multiliterate discourse, by means of which learners are introduced to writing emoji stories and flash fictions and then to translating them into words.

Keywords*: emojis, content creators, speech acts, multimodality, participatory culture*

[1] **Ioana MUDURE-IACOB** is an assistant professor in the Department of Specialised Foreign Languages, Faculty of Letters and has been teaching ESP since 2009 to undergraduates majoring in Business Management, Tourism, Political Sciences, Sports and Psychology. She has a PhD in American Literature, with a thesis on Walt Whitman's Polymorphous Aesthetics. She is currently working in the DIAL4U Erasmus+ project, focusing on developing digital technologies and pedagogy in language learning and teaching processes.

Her scientific fields of interest include Content and Language Integrated Learning, Assessment using digital tools, Gamification in Language Teaching, Digital Escape Rooms in Formative Assessment, incorporating ICT tools in teaching and evaluation. Email: ioana.mudure@ubbcluj.ro.

REZUMAT: ***Infuzarea învățării limbii cu emojiuri: de la funcția fatică la expresii frazeologice și ficțiune flash.*** Navigând printre resurse digitale în căutarea unei abordări personalizate de învățare, studenții se identifică adesea ca internauți familiarizați cu un limbaj codat al Internetului, care e rar corelat cu limbajul specializat învățat la cursurile de limbă străină. Pentru a ține ritmul cu noile tendințe din comunicarea virtuală, profesorii sunt deseori nevoiți să-și extindă apartenența la o tipologie discursivă prin încurajarea studenților să devină creatori de conținut. Analizând potențialul utilizării emojiurilor în cadrul actelor de vorbire, prezenta lucrare încearcă să indice variante de integrare a emojiurilor ca marcaje sociale și ca instrumente de dezvoltare a abilităților lingvistice și digitale în cadrul cursurilor de limbă străină. Procesul de utilizare a emojiurilor în predarea limbilor străine pornește de la integrarea emojiurilor ca indicatori în utilizarea funcției fatice a comunicării, pentru consolidarea actelor locuționare și ilocuționare ale limbajului. De asemenea, emojiurile pot fi utilizate în predarea expresiilor idiomatice, prin explorarea funcțiilor ilocuționare și perlocuționare în activități interactive de vocabular sau secvențe gamificate. Utilizarea emojiurilor ca funcții perlocuționare în învățarea limbii străine se aplică și scrierii narative, ca mecanism de dezvoltare a discursului de multiliteratie, prin scrierea de narațiuni de tip *flash fiction* folosind emojiuri și apoi prin decodarea acestora în text.

Cuvinte-cheie*: emojiuri, creatori de conținut, acte de vorbire, multimodalitate, cultură participativă*

1. Introduction

The changing needs and interests of digital natives regarding communication and learning have reshaped the process of language teaching to such an extent that teachers and instructors may often need to switch between multiple roles in order to cater for such needs. From instructor to content creator, entertainer or assessor, language teachers are confronted with finding new ways of embedding content into more Netspeak[2]-oriented frameworks. This attempt to innovate the learning process is supported by the importance of teaching students 21st century skills along the language learning process, from critical thinking, and problem-solving, to digital skills and visual literacy or content creation.

Such complex teaching patterns that suit learners (whose brains are wired for games and the visual) can be customised either by using particular digital tools and apps that make learning more engaging, by pairing teaching

[2] Netspeak, referred to as the internet language is often encountered in online forms of communication and can be embedded in teaching and learning by using emoji, memes or gifs, as facets of virtual expressions, supporting a more fluid form of communication for digital natives.

with gamification or by mapping the learning process with visual literacy cues. The last option, which refers to teaching and learning while empowering visual literate learners, is not a new approach in terms of using text and images to support comprehension. However, the current paper focuses on analysing and indicating potential ways in which emojis, as visual markers, can be used as resourceful instruments of language teaching and learning.

There are various premises to consider prior to describing the practical teaching sequences and rationale behind this endeavour. Firstly, the use of visual cues and Netspeak, understood "as a blend between speech, writing and electronically-mediated features" (Crystal 2006, 48), stems from the dual coding theory coined by Paivio (1971), which states that the embedding of multiple codes of representation leads to better processing of information. By favouring visual support via emojis in their learning, digital natives perceive language learning coded this way as more engaging, while also allowing them to become more autonomous learners.

Secondly, the rationale behind using the dual code of information theory and tailoring language content with Netspeak features was to sketch the language class according to the principles of participatory culture:

> a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. [...] Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement (Jenkins et al. 2006, 4)

With learners exhibiting a hype of communication and a need for in-group sense of belonging, on the one hand, and teachers mastering a complex network of methods, approaches and know-how, on the other hand, the crossroads in terms of language learning can be identified in the use of language classes as participatory culture repositories. Moreover, such participatory culture can be supported by customising the teaching-learning process as affinity spaces, defined as "prime space where people engage in 21st century teaching, learning, doing and being [...] primarily defined by an affinity for solving certain sorts of problems that include things like media production, citizen science, political activism, fan-fiction writing, video games." (Gee 2017, 28) For language classes, the affordances of affinity spaces allow for using the foreign language and Netspeak-infused language as a vehicle for learning, while also teaching students 21st century skills.

Thirdly, the paper aims to explore the functions and practical integration of emojis as carriers of linguistic utterance features in language teaching and learning with reference to the theory of speech acts (Austin 1962, Searle 1969).

The objective is to draw on frameworks of using emoji as markers of linguistic expression, by tailoring learning activities and sequences for all speech acts, from using emoji and phatic communication as icebreakers, to teaching idioms and vocabulary by using the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of emojis and, eventually, exploiting the perlocutionary force of emoji into scenarios of digital storytelling.

2. Contextualising Emojis in the Framework of Language Teaching and Learning through the Lenses of Speech Acts

The capitalisation of non-verbal cues as substitutes for facial expressions, phatic communication, or emotions is not a recent addition to the fields of communication and education, particularly with regards to computer-mediated learning (CML). Emoticons, memes and emojis have been devised to improve the potential of written text by structuring information in a more Netspeak-framed context, thus becoming more engaging with Gen Z learners. Emojis, having emoticons as their precursors,

> (from the Japanese e[picture]+ moji [character]) are graphic symbols with predefined names/IDs and code (Unicode), which include not only representations of facial expressions (e.g., 😄), abstract concepts (e.g., 😘), and emotions/ feelings (e.g., ❤️), but also animals (e.g., 🐼), plants (e.g., 🌹), activities (e.g., 🎉), gestures/ body parts (e.g., 🙏), and objects (e.g., 🍴) (Rodrigues et al. 2018, 394)

Created by Shigetaka Kurita as a set of typographic symbols in the late 1990[3] to provide an equivalent of facial expressions, gestures and objects and prevent digital miscommunication, emojis gained their rapid popularity with the development of Unicode[4] for social media. "These typographic symbols, also referred to as emoji code, are currently integrated in nearly all text-based digital interactions, rendering discourse more affective and being a digital alternative to paraverbal cues" (Mudure-Iacob 2021, 646). Emojis, though apparently structured

[3] Emojitimeline (https://emojitimeline.com/), the platform designed for the tracking of cultural and technical events in the history of emojis, records that the first emoji set was released in 1997 and later (1999) expanded into a 176-emoji set created for the "i-mode" feature of mobile phones, allowing communication that was limited to 250 characters. The event marked the becoming of emoji as a global phenomenon.

[4] Unicode is responsible for providing software internationalization standards (adopted as international standard) and data, while also specifying how text is represented in software products such as smartphones, PCs, laptops or iPads. It represents the mechanism by which Japanese emojis were constantly added to updated software products.

in face and non-face non-verbal cues, cover a wide variety of categories that fall under the sections: content (smileys and people, animals and nature, food and drink, travel and places, activity, objects, symbols, flags), meaning (behavioural, non-behavioural) and emotion (positive, neutral, negative).

The potential of using emojis is not restricted to acts of social media communication and consistent research (Bai et al. 2019) has been conducted in various other fields of study, from Computer science, to Communication, Psychology, Marketing, Linguistics, Medicine or Education. Furthermore, Li (2019) enumerates a set of functions that emojis have, from users choosing to express emotions within online conversations, to serving as pictorial cues, to conveying tone and strength of an emotion in writing, as politicons (10) or as modes of artistic expression. With regards to the literature review in specific fields of study related to the current topic (Communication, Linguistics), research on emoji was centred on "1. the role of emoji in computer mediated communication. 2. the effect of emoji on user and emoji preference in different contexts" (Bai et. al. 2019, *10*) and respectively on "1. the pragmatic functions of Emoji as non-verbal clues. 2. the possibility of emoji functioning as independent languages" (10).

The synthetised conclusions of the reviewed research (Bai et. al. 2019, *10*) sketched on the potential of emojis to replace the lack of non-verbal cues, to enhance online social interaction and convey more complex meanings, as well as highlighted links between emoji preference and cultural and linguistic background. Likewise, the pragmatics approach research indicated that emoji and speech acts can be correlated, with the emoji replacing a morpheme unit.

Regarding the use of emojis in educational frameworks, more specifically in language learning and teaching, studies have delved on their effectiveness in education (particularly children's and online learning). Bai (et. al.)'s (2019) review indicated that there is scarce research in this direction, while the few studies focus on the potential of emojis for language classes as a means of overcoming language barriers and enhancing English learning, as a mechanism of facilitating more genuine communication in online interactions and as awareness triggers regarding the non-verbal features of communication.

Referring to semantic functions, emojis can impact language learning due to their visual rhetoric function, allowing a more complex understanding of meaning in computer-mediated communication. Text integration of emojis (Zhou et al. 2017), as well as emojis as supplement to text (Ai et al., 2017) are used as the two dimensions of reference in this paper, for drafting language teaching scenarios with the aid of emojis. Likewise, a brief presentation of the Speech Act theory is deemed necessary, to locate the potential of emojis in the framework of language teaching and learning through the lenses of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forces.

First presented by Austin (1962) and later developed and reconceptualized by Searle (1969), the Speech Act theory was founded on the premises that upon the production of an utterance (be it spoken or written), simultaneous speech acts are produced. The three speech acts identified by Austin are the *locutionary act,* the *illocutionary act* and the *perlocutionary act*. While the locutionary act of any utterance represents the production of the linguistic form of utterance (sounds, morphemes, syntax, semantics), the illocutionary act entails the intended meaning, and the perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the utterance on the hearer.

Searle (1969) brings significant modifications to Austin's theory by rejecting the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts and argues in favour of the inseparability of the two parts. Moreover, Searle provides a detailed classification of illocutionary acts into categories, which include assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, indicating how some utterances can have juxtaposing functions. Taking into account these features of language while teaching, communication is thus built as a cause-and-effect mechanism of reactions, intentions and meanings, which can further be enriched when the non-verbal dimension is added. In addition to the impact of speech acts upon written and spoken text, the speech act theory encompasses non-verbal communication like signs and pictures, and emojis.

The particular use of emojis in computer-mediated learning indicates the performance of all speech acts, according to specific contextual uses and types of communication. The locutionary act can be triggered with the use of emojis as replacements of portions of a text or words, such as in the example: "I ❤️ my English classes", where the partially coded meaning is represented by the emoji. Secondly, the addition of an emoji to accompany a sentence/phrase (either embedded in the text or at the end of the text) triggers the illocutionary act, with the function of disambiguating meaning. The example: "Write your name on the exam paper! 👩‍🏫" illustrates the illocutionary act, by means of which the intended purpose of the statement is amplified by the emoji, the non-verbal cue showing a teacher and emphasizing the directive dimension of the act (the teacher trying to get the student to do something). Thirdly, the perlocutionary act can also be identified in the use of emojis as the effect of communication on the hearer, a substitute for verbal communication, where reactions and responses can be provided by gestures, facial expressions or body posture. In computer-mediated learning, such an example would be a brief dialogue between the speaker: "I passed my final exam with flying colours." and students: "🥳", wherein the emoji (partying face) fulfils the effect function of the speech act, a reaction of joy and celebration.

The three instances of emojis in reference to the three Speech Acts will be illustrated in the following section, with an emphasis on how language teaching and learning activities can be designed using emojis. The educational

potential has been little analysed in the framework of online learning despite the growing popularity of these typographic symbols among digital natives. Likewise, the intent is also to illustrate how the design of language learning tasks centred on emoji use can enhance a more participatory culture, supporting the language class as affinity space.

3. Building Vocabulary Skills One Emoji at a Time

A significant need for change in the architecture of language teaching occurred with the shift into online and hybrid learning formats generated by the Covid-19 pandemic period. In addition to having to adapt worksheets, textbooks and materials to suit the digital framework, language instructors also dealt with a recurrent lack of interest and disengagement from students, caused either by online fatigue or limited digital literacy skills. To bridge this gap, most language instructors designed online classes that would be closer to the online identities of digital natives, in an attempt to create a participatory culture in the class. Netspeak infusion of content teaching (via memes and emojis) and embedding of gamification in the practice and formative assessment scenarios appear to provide a reliable framework for building language skills in a more learner-vernacular manner.

The scope of the current paper is to indicate ways in which emojis, as non-verbal symbols and as carriers of linguistic utterance features, can be integrated in tasks developing vocabulary, communicative and productive skills. The projection of vocabulary and storytelling sequences was done over the academic year 2021-2022 (mostly online format) to a group of 75 pre-service primary school teachers, using a set of digital tools and repositories that allowed the language instructor and learners to become more engaged in the collaborative features of online learning. The students' overall level of English was B2 (as established by an initial placement test), whereas their digital skills varied from beginner to advanced (students were encouraged at the beginning of the term to assess their level by using the Europass Digital Skills Test available online) To depict these teaching-learning scenarios, this section describes and illustrates categories of tasks and their speech act functionality, as well as the speech act functions triggered by the dual coding of information via emojis.

3.1. Phatic communication, emojis and building rapport in the English class

Stemming from the premise that language learners are multiliterate actors whose interaction in an online environment is improved if the participatory culture is built, the initial step was to initiate a form of discursive membership. The underlying liaison was established as the Netspeak feature, encapsulated in the recurrent use of emoji in online interactions, and used as a tool for

building phatic communion, which, "in interaction, constitutes the use of language and/or paralanguage to create ties of union, where this purpose takes precedence over transmitting information" (Aull 2019, 210). By encouraging learners to customise or import their online identities into the language class, the intention is to project a more engaging learning environment, where students can feel more at ease with their multiliteracy skills. Laver cited in Aull (2019) describes phatic talk as marked by openings and closings, along marginal phases of communication, and is considered to be "essential to first establishing the relationship and finally reinforcing their continuation beyond interactional encounters" (210).

Considering that emojis can provide a Netspeak-based structure for initial interaction and the building of phatic communion as generator of phatic communication, we designed a pre-class asynchronous task to initiate learners in the network of making introductions via emoji-based phatic talk. By using Genial.ly as the digital repository, students were required to use 5 emojis of their choice (Emojipedia was indicated to insert the emojis into the document) to describe themselves, provide a textual description and send the dual coded bio to the teacher, who later created the Genial.ly board displaying only the emoji codes first. A sample coded bio was provided by the language teacher, as illustrated in Figure 1, for students to use as model and for a marker of phatic talk.

Figure 1. Teacher's coded emoji bio and textual description
Source: Genial.ly presentation designed and distributed on students' Learning Management System https://view.genial.ly/62e24c8b8e85840011d75eb7/interactive-content-emoji

In the first online interaction during class, students were asked to choose another colleague (a randomising app was used) and provide a textual/verbal interpretation of the emoji bio for the assigned peer. After having obtained the peers' interpretations, the teacher displayed on the board both students' own emoji bio and textual descriptions (shown in the text under each emoji set in Figure 2) and the textual interpretations provided by their peers in class (shown in each yellow speech bubble in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Students' introductions using emojis and textual bios
Source: Genial.ly presentation designed and distributed on students' Learning Management System https://view.genial.ly/62e24c8b8e85840011d75eb7/interactive-content-emoji

Coined as an icebreaker activity, the task aimed to allow learners to express themselves by using emojis, but also by using English language as the instrument of decoding the non-verbal bio. Upon the virtual interaction, students were challenged to bring their own interpretation to the emoji-coded bio provided by other students in advance and were later shown the original text written to accompany each emoji bio. Such a task delves on both the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of emoji, the former supported by the student-writer's control over the manifestation of his/her original intentions, whereas the latter indicates the effect of the coded utterance on the hearer/ reader that is in this case. Taking into account that "the illocutionary force of an utterance is part of what a speaker means by the utterance, part of what he or she intends to convey by making it" (Dressner and Herring 2010, 261), the accompanying of the emoji with a textual description was intended to create a space for communication and exchange of meaning.

The perlocutionary force is supported by the peers' interpretation of the coded emojis, as their textual interpretation was the effect that the visual cues had on them as hearers/ readers. The differences between the textual descriptors and the interpretated meaning confirm that emojis are "not simply decoded, but inferred[…] and there is a gap between the prototypical referent of an emoji and its eventual interpretation in a context" (Yus 2019, 2). To illustrate this disparity, the example indicated in Figure 2 above shows a student's emoji bio🤑🍔⚽📺👭 , which was produced with the intention of saying "I have a business with burger restaurant. I like football, but just watching, no playing. I have a nice family." (the wording belongs to one student). The interpretation made by a reader of the emoji code was "I. likes making money,

eating burgers and playing football? She has a family and they like watching movies." (the wording belongs to one student), which emphasizes the importance of the perlocutionary force and how emojis can be used to teach difference in meanings in the online processing of interactions.

The benefit of using such an icebreaker task (which entails asynchronous preparation and online interaction as well) was that students found themselves at ease in the online learning environment by having to operate with their own digital skills and Internet language, while at the same time, being able to express themselves using English and admit to fears, concerns, interests in an act of phatic communion. Moreover, the opening section of the class served as a foundational ground for participatory culture, clearly expressing that learners are expected to become content creators and manifest engagement in the language learning process.

3.2. Coding and decoding vocabulary with emojis and speech acts

The subsequent purpose of teaching vocabulary and designing practice and formative assessment scenarios using emojis was to verify the usefulness of these non-verbal symbols in the teaching and practice of language skills, on the one hand, and to observe how emojis can be markers of linguistic inference, on the other hand. The current section illustrates how vocabulary tasks were configured to serve these purposes and how content was structured in terms of emoji coding and decoding, particularly through the teaching and practice of idiomatic expressions.

The process of embedding emojis in language teaching and designing vocabulary practice tasks around these symbols includes several steps, meant to get learners accustomed to the insertion of Netspeak features into the learning process and to the decoding they need to use in order to process meaning. The choice of idiomatic expressions as the vehicle of testing emoji usefulness in terms of language learning was accounted for by the usual lack of interest manifested by students towards idioms. Either because students consider idioms difficult to remember in the exact structure, or because idioms have different alternatives in one's native language, idiom-based vocabulary tasks are often regarded as increased difficulty activities and often avoided by learners. By dual coding idioms in terms of text and/or visual (emoji), the intention was to facilitate more engaging learning environments for students and motivate them to invest more effort in the study of this vocabulary section.

The manner of structuring vocabulary tasks around emojis was founded on Yus' depiction of emoji functions as

> emoji within (the text) - the emoji aids in (or alters) the inference of the propositional content of the text next to which the emoji is typed, and may also favour the generation of non-propositional effects, emoji without (the text) - the emoji performs communicative functions on its own […], emoji beyond (the text) - the emoji has a qualifying role but not towards the content of the message next to which it is typed, but towards the act of communication as a whole (e.g. is inferred in parallel to verbal content) (Yus 2019, 7).

To develop students' language and digital literacy skills in this respect, emoji tasks were structured in the following gradual sequences: 1. Teaching idioms with the addition of emojis next to text (the emoji beyond the text function); 2. Exposure of idioms with minimal to partial emoji replacement of text (emojis within the text function); 3. Idioms practice tasks with emoji decoding activities (emojis without the text) and vocabulary tasks focusing on inference (combined functions). All three sequences will be described and illustrated in the following paragraphs, with supporting arguments for how speech act features are carried out by the insertion of emojis.

The first sequence, *teaching idioms with the addition of emojis next to text,* served as the initial stage of the vocabulary teaching process and was used during the initial classes to set the pace for using Netspeak-embedded features and familiarise learners with the functionality of emojis in language learning. Various idioms were shown, explained and accompanied by emojis next to the text, to cater for the dual coding of information and to provide as complex a meaning as possible. The emoji code that accompanied the text was created by the language instructor using the Rebus Club digital tool[5].

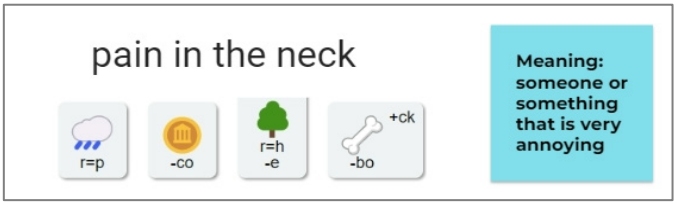

Figure 3. Example of idiom explained by emoji addition and textual description
Source: Jamboard designed for teaching idioms https://jamboard.google.com/d/1LrnuUDZEZrgZ5dpib4jWrVnLIH6zxusf-EEH2xetw6E/edit?usp=sharing

[5] Rebus Creator Club is a digital tool and platform that can be used for creating puzzles using emojis, icons and pictograms. It allows teachers to introduce the word/concept/phrase, select a difficulty level and/or choose from a variety of languages, and the platform transforms the word into a sequence of emojis that will be further used as coded text. In order to decode the meaning indicated by the pictogram different mental operations need to be performed: + signifies the addition of a letter/morpheme, - signifies the removal of a letter/morpheme, = signifies the replacement of a letter/morpheme, with combined operations being possible upon one pictogram.

The illustration shown in Figure 3 above is an example of an idiom taught during class in this initial sequence and consists of three parts: the idiom, *pain in the neck*, the accompanying emoji representation and the textual definition, *someone or something that is very annoying*. Using the emoji beyond the text function as described by Yus (2019), the same criterion can be applied to the use of emojis in teaching vocabulary with the emphasis that "the emoji does not qualify the content of the [...] message but connotes the act of communication as whole" (42). By exposing students to a multimodal display of a vocabulary item, the process of comprehension is both more engaging and complex, as compared to the traditional exposure to idioms shown with only the textual description/definition. To match the actual structure of the idiom, students also had visual (one pictogram for each word) and textual support. After being presented with idioms in this manner, vocabulary practice tasks followed (matching, fill in the blanks, cloze tasks etc.) to facilitate retention. Emoji used in this manner, with added textual support and description of meaning, perform the locutionary act, and add visual imagery to a new vocabulary unit.

The second sequence consisted in *recurrent exposure of idioms with minimal to partial emoji replacement of text* (emoji within the text function), in an attempt to explore if emoji can influence the way the accompanying text is interpreted and how meaning can be generated when text is partially replaced by visual symbols such as emojis. The replacement of text within an idiom with emojis was gradually performed, starting with the exposure to idioms that were displayed with both text and emojis, without the added written text that described the meaning of the idiom and continuing with the teaching and practice of idioms in which most of the parts were shown as emoji.

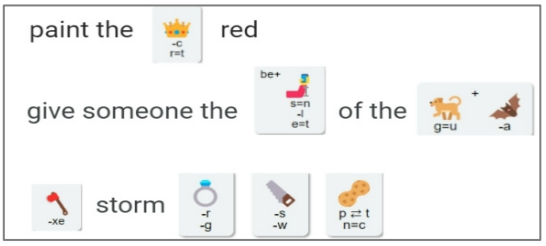

Figure 4. Example of idioms with emoji inserted within text
Source: Jamboard designed for teaching idioms
https://jamboard.google.com/d/1LrnuUDZEZrgZ5dpib4jWrVnLIH6zxusf-EEH2xetw6E/edit?usp=sharing

Figure 4 shows an example of how idioms were taught in this sequence, where learners were exposed to vocabulary units by using the same dual coding framework, but with a higher visual insertion frequency. Students could learn

idioms that were shown with one word replaced with an emoji, or with multiple words being replaced by emojis. The motivation for doing so stood in the importance of having learners retain the correct and full structure of idioms, as quite often, they may remember an idiom, without being, however, *able of* accurately writing or using it. The three examples illustrated above show the idioms *paint the town red*[6], *give someone the benefit of the doubt*[7], *a storm in a teacup*[8], with minimal to partial replacement of words with emojis.

By replacing verbal elements within idioms, emojis can here be used to increase the processing effort, thus making learners become more involved in their learning. Moreover, this function of emoji within (the text) communicating propositional information (content) through the emoji- enriched text relies on the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, as the meaning can be generated based on the speaker/ teacher's intention in creating the dual coded idiom and the hearer/learner's decoding capacity to process the meaning by understanding the pictograms that emojis communicate, along with the additional micro-processes of replacing or eliminating letters to reach the intended word. A derived advantage of exposing learners to idioms coded in such a manner is that it requires them to use their vocabulary skills when identifying the pictogram represented by the emoji, which enhances the use of productive skills.

The third sequence in the process of teaching idioms by using emoji was designed with a focus on *idioms practice tasks with emoji decoding activities (emoji without the text) and vocabulary tasks focusing on inference (combined functions)*. The emoji without the text function coined by Yus (2019) refers to the fact that "the emoji is the only source of information […] when the emoji has no accompanying text" (22) and entails activating learners' ability to use creative thinking and their language skills to decode first the pictogram and then the correct word order of the emojis.

---

6 The word *town* was here replaced with the emoji pictogram 👑 (*crown*) that students had to identify correctly, then remove the letter *c* (-c) and replace the letter *r* with *t* (r=t).

7 Two words were replaced in this idiom, *benefit* and *doubt*, the former illustrated in the emoji pictogram 🤳 (*selfie*), for which students had to add the particle be- in front, replace the letter *s* with *n* (s=n), remove the letter *l*(-l) and replace *e* with *t* (e=t), and the latter, *doubt*, shown as a combination of emoji 🐕 (*dog*) and 🦇 (*bat*), with the replacement of the letter *g* with *u* (g=u) and a removal of the letter *a* (-a) in the second word, thus resulting into the word *doubt*.

8 The idiom *a storm in a teacup* was shown as a combination of four emojis and one word and the decoding was done the following way: *a*, shown as the emoji 🪓 (*axe*) from which letters *x* and *e* were removed (-xe), *in*, shown as the emoji 💍 (*ring*), with the removal of letters *r* and *g* (-r,-g), *a*, displayed as the emoji 🪚 (*saw*), without the letters *s* and *w* (-s,-w) and *teacup*, shown as the emoji 🥜 (*peanut*), where the letters *p* and *t* were switched (p->t) and *n* was replaced with *c* (n=c).

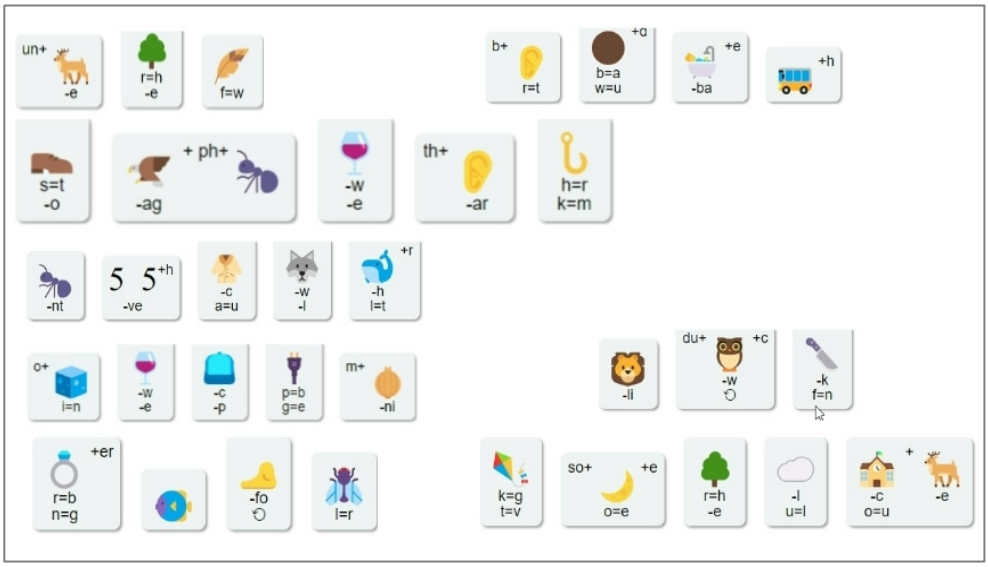

Figure 5. Example of idioms expressed as emoji without text
Source: Jamboard designed for teaching idioms
https://jamboard.google.com/d/1LrnuUDZEZrgZ5dpib4jWrVnLIH6zxusf-EEH2xetw6E/edit?usp=sharing

The examples[9] shown in Figure 5 above were made to be associated with different vocabulary practice tasks. To solve these tasks, students first had to decode them by putting them into words. The perlocutionary force is used in this case, as the learner needs to reconstitute the parts of the utterance, select each proper item of the idiom (particularly since some emoji may indicate multiple meanings[10]) and then "assemble" it into a correct idiom, to be further used in vocabulary practice tasks. Some types of vocabulary practice tasks were matching (match the emoji coded idioms to the correct meanings), text infilling (complete the sentence with one correct idiom chosen from the list of emoji codes) and open cloze (use one idiom to complete the sentence) tasks.

[9] The emoji coded idioms read (from right to left, top to bottom) as such: *under the weather, beat around the bush, the elephant in the room, a fish out of water, once in a blue moon, on cloud nine, bigger fish to fry, give someone the cold shoulder.*

[10] One example is the emoji 🙏, which can be read as *thank you* or *please*, but also, in slang, as *high-five*.

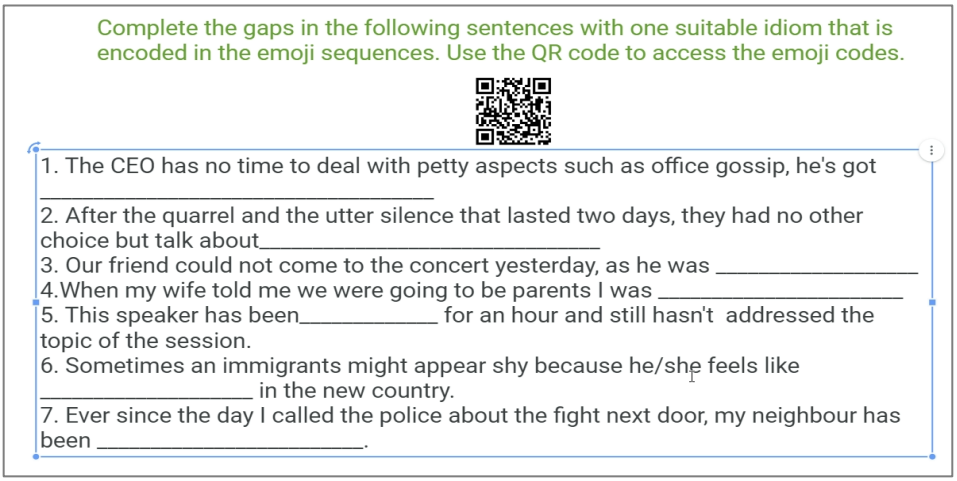

Figure 6. Example of open cloze task customised for emoji coded idioms
Source: Jamboard designed for teaching idioms https://jamboard.google.com/d/1LrnuUDZEZrgZ5dpib4jWrVnLIH6zxusf-EEH2xetw6E/edit?usp=sharing

The open cloze task shown in Figure 6 above was designed to enable learners to practice their vocabulary skills, by identifying the proper idiom and then recreate the idiom by decoding the emoji pictograms. In processing these steps, the emoji without the text required the learner to grasp the intended meaning of the utterance/idiom. The other types of vocabulary practice tasks were matching tasks and fill in the blanks using a set of emoji-encoded idioms.

Lastly, the practice of vocabulary skills was also extended in gamified formative assessment scenarios designed as Digital Escape Rooms, in which students were challenged to escape virtual locked rooms consisting of different vocabulary, reading, listening and speaking tasks by obtaining passwords to unlock these virtual rooms. Some of these passwords were hidden in emoji-based idioms that learners were supposed to decode.

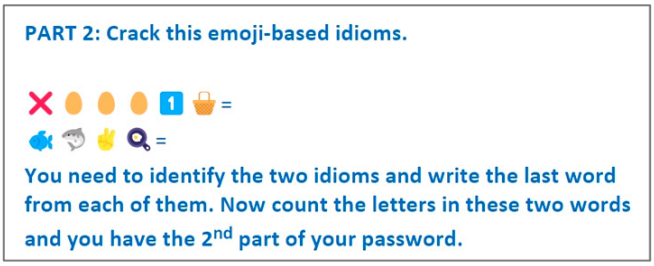

Figure 7. Sample from virtual room in the Digital Escape Room
Source: Digital Escape Room https://ubbcluj-my.sharepoint.com/:o:/g/personal/ioana_mudure_ubbcluj_ro/ErGxyuVWhXdNkVwqZQajxmABFrM4wc0S8IyexBZU-m_cjg

However, the visual representation of idioms as emojis in Figure 7 was, in this case, different from the other above-shown examples, where each pictogram would represent one item in the idiom structure. Instead, the idioms in the Digital Escape Room were depicted by emojis hinting at the overall meaning of the two idioms[11], rather than the prior literal-visual representation. The purpose of encoding idioms with emojis in a different manner was to assess learners' capacity to combine critical thinking, digital literacy and language skills in order to find the correct idioms. By decoding the emojis into the correct idioms, learners were able to boost their inference skills, while making use of the perlocutionary force of speech acts and using the emoji without the text feature to turn visual comprehension into textual meaning.

3.3. Writing an emoji story in two speech acts

Having initiated students in the practice of receptive skills and use of idioms with emojis, the last part of this endeavour was to use emojis in the teaching and practice of productive skills, writing and speaking, relying on the potential of emojis to fulfil pragmatic functions such as signalling emotions, as an effect of the illocutionary and perlocutionary force. Students were also encouraged to explore in their free-time use of social media any language-related uses of emojis[12] to understand how these symbols can be used beyond the communicative feature. The two types of tasks carried out during language classes aimed to develop productive skills and included: *speaking tasks,* in which learners had to produce sentences using emojis as prompts, and *writing tasks*, in which groups of students created a digital story by using six emojis.

The speaking tasks were customised as *oral chain emoji stories* that students had to produce, after having been assigned into groups of eight (and encouraged to work in breakout rooms when instruction was online). The visual support consisted of a board with emojis from which each student had to choose an emoji and make a verbal sentence by using the character/place/ emotion of activity indicated by the emoji. The following speaker in the group would then choose a different emoji and use it as a prompt to continue the story, by linking it to the previous speaker. For a more dynamic process, a name generator was also used within groups, and, at the end of the activity, groups

[11] The idioms *don't put all your eggs in one basket* and *bigger fish to fry* have been previously taught and practiced in different tasks.

[12] Two of the recommended resources were Disney's YouTube channel *As told by emojis*, a video channel that reconstitutes popular Disney movies into emoji short animations and Twitter's topic-based #EmojiArtHistory, a collection of art work examples retold through emoji sequences, supported by renowned museums and art galleries.

were invited to show the sequence of eight chosen emoji and retell the story to the class. The illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of speech acts are used by learners in their attempts to produce sentences based on one item of visual imagery, bearing various functions such as expressing emotion, creating a sequential meaning or inferring from the sense intended by previous speakers.

The writing tasks were structured as *six-emoji flash fiction*, with students working in groups of four, the requirements being to create flash fiction using six emojis[13], a fictional work that is very short (up to 1,000 words), but has characters and plot, similar to a short story. In their groups, students had to create their set of six emojis and write a flash fiction using emojis as prompts and pre-taught content on the structure of stories, suitable connectors and linking devices. After the emoji set was agreed on within the group, it would then be passed on to the next group of students, who would write their text story using the same combination of emojis. Circulating the six-emoji sets among all groups led to having six different versions of text for the same set of emoji, which revealed differences in perception and interpretation among groups.

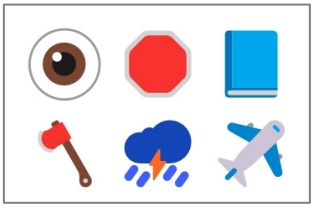

Figure 8. Example of a six-emoji visual story created by students
Source: https://jamboard.google.com/d/1LrnuUDZEZrgZ5dpib4jWrVnLIH6zxusf-EEH2xetw6E/edit?usp=sharing

The example shown in Figure 8 above illustrates one of the visual stories created by one group of students, who chose 6 emoji and also provided the textual translation into words of the emoji story. Since the requirement was to first create the six-emoji story and pass it further to other groups, without accompanying the textual representation, each of the visual stories received a number of eight textual alternatives (for the eight groups of learners). The original textual translation, made by the same group that created the visual emoji set, was:

> Ben didn't see the stop sign and was about to be hit by a car because he was reading a very interesting part in his book. All of a sudden, he saw a woman chasing her husband with an axe because he got a tattoo with his

[13] The choice over the use of only 6 emojis was based on one subcategory of flash fiction, the six-word stories, which require the use of creativity and language skills.

> ex's name. She was fuming with rage. So, to avoid a murder, he jumped in front of the woman and screamed Beware! Plane crash! Then everything went dark. (translation from emoji-coded story, made by group 1)

To show how the perlocutionary force has effects also on visual imagery, not solely on textual cues, another description was chosen, from a group of students who had to decode the six-emoji story by using inference and employing the emotional features that emojis bear. Their textual outline of the same emoji story was:

> One day, a man was walking down the street, fed up with life. Arriving in front of a bookstore, he stopped because he saw a book in the window that said: "Restart your life from the beginning so that it brings more light into your days". Walking down the street and reading the book, he was struck with love at first sight, seeing the most beautiful woman ever. Next minute, they were embarking in a plane, ready to start living a happy life. Or not really. (translation from emoji-coded story, made by group 2)

While repeating some of the words illustrated by the emojis (book, seeing, plane), the plot differed significantly, as well as the way in which learners chose to switch between affective tones. This confirms how the perlocutionary force in case of the second group enabled hearers/students to give a different meaning than the original one, crafted due to the illocutionary force in the case of group 1. Also, this coding and decoding sequence among groups was relevant for the activation of the class participatory culture, as students were visibly enjoying working on the task and collaborating. The main outcome of using this activity as a productive skills task was that, by working with emojis, learners had the opportunity to use their creativity by becoming content creators, spotlight the proper language in decoding the stories, while also activating background knowledge of emoji coding and decoding, as well as collaborating to negotiate content. In this respect, such tasks can be holistic practice samples that enable learners to use and enhance their 21st-century skills, while also allowing them to indulge in the familiar Netspeak dimension this time customised to recreate the affinity space of the language class.

4. Conclusions

The customisation of ESP classes with multimodality and the insertion of visual imagery via Netspeak implies a dual effort, particularly given that the vernacular language of the Internet is not always mastered by both teachers and learners. While using the visual literacy potential of emojis in the teaching and practice of vocabulary and productive skills, the impact upon language

learners can be manifold. The pragmatic functions that emojis can have, with the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts that are performed to grasp meanings were the premises of the current paper. Having sketched dimensions of relevance and effectiveness for the use of emojis in the teaching, learning, practice and assessment of language, students were challenged to experiment content creation and the blend between Internet language and foreign language within the language class, which was considered an affinity space.

The experimental process included three stages, all customised with the embedding of emojis in the teaching of receptive and productive skills, and with the subsequent purpose of facilitating participatory class culture, while learners were exposed to multiliteracy and language content. The preliminary stage focused on building phatic communion and rapport, with students' interactions and introductions using an emoji-coded presentation to set the pace and the foundation of participatory culture. The second, most consistent stage, referred to the teaching, practice and gamified assessment of idioms using emojis, either as additions to textual descriptors, as partial replacements or as codes that entailed perlocutionary and illocutionary acts as deciphering mechanisms of idiomatic expressions. The last piece of the experiment empowered learners to become content creators by engaging in emoji - textual storytelling and visual imagery tasks to support the production of speaking and writing skills.

The usefulness of this endeavour was confirmed, on the one hand, through the personal observations carried out along the two semesters, with significant increases in students' vocabulary quiz results along the academic year, and, on the other hand, from students' feedback and enthusiasm in working with the customised vocabulary sequences. Despite the considerable effort in creating such tasks and providing frequent vocabulary recycling learning environments, the students were more motivated in their language learning process and became more accustomed to use multimodality as a means of autonomous learning.

WORKS CITED

Ai, Wei, Xuan Lu, Xuanzhe Liu, Ning Wang, Gang Huang, and Qiaozhu Mei. 2017. "Untangling Emoji Popularity through Semantic Embeddings." *Paper Presented at the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*. 11(1), 2-11. https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/14903.

Aull, Bethany. 2019. "A Study of Phatic Emoji Use in WhatsApp Communication." *Internet Pragmatics*. 2 (2): 206–232. https://doi.org.2. 10.1075/ip.00029.aul.

Austin, John L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bai, Qiyu, Qi Dan, Zhe Mu, and Maokun Yang. 2019. "A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives." *Frontiers in Psychology, 10: 2019*. https://doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02221.

Crystal, David. 2006. *Language and the Internet (2nd ed)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org.10.1017/CBO9780511487002.

Dresner, Eli, Susan Herring. 2010. "Functions of the Nonverbal in CMC: Emoticons and Illocutionary Force." *Communication Theory*, 20(3): 249–268. https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-2885.2010.01362.X

Gee, James Paul. 2017. "Affinity Spaces and 21st Century Learning." *Educational Technology*, 57(2): 27–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44430520.

Jenkins, Henry, Katie Clinton, Ravi Purushotma, Alice Robison, and Margaret Weigel. 2006. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education For the 21st Century*. Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation. https://www.macfound.org/media/article_pdfs/jenkins_white_paper.pdf.

Li, Dan. 2019. "Examining the Functionality and Aesthetics of Emojis." *International Journal of Arts Education.* 17 (1): 1-17. https://www.academia.edu/49144598/Examining_the_functionality_and_aesthetics_of_emojis.

Mudure-Iacob, Ioana. 2022. "From Emojis to Storytelling - Enhancing Language Learning Through Collaborative Approaches." In *Education, Reflection, Development - ERD 2021, vol 2. European Proceedings of Educational Sciences* edited by Ion Albulescu and Cristian Stan: 642-658. European Publisher. https://doi.org/10.15405/epes.22032.64

Paivio, Allan. 1971. *Imagery and Verbal Processes*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Rodrigues, David et al. 2018. "Lisbon Emoji and Emoticon database (LEED): Norms for emoji and emoticons in seven evaluative dimensions." *Behaviour Research Methods* 50: 392-405, https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-017-0878-6

Searle, John. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org. 10.1017/CBO9781139173438

Yus, Francisco. 2019. Emoji: *A Full Cyberpragmatic Approach*. Paper Delivered at the 16th China Pragmatics Conference. Nanchang (China). https://www.academia.edu/48934618/Emoji_A_full_cyberpragmatic_approach

Zhou, Rui, Jasmine Hentschel, and Neha Kumar. 2017. "Goodbye Text, Hello Emoji: Mobile Communication on WeChat in China." *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*: 748-759. https://doi.org. 10.1145/3025453.3025800

Webography:

https://emojitimeline.com/

https://emojipedia.org/

https://view.genial.ly/62e24c8b8e85840011d75eb7/interactive-content-emoji

https://ubbcluj-my.sharepoint.com/:o:/g/personal/ioana_mudure_ubbcluj_ro/ErGxyuVWhXdNkVwqZQajxmABFrM4wc0S8IyexBZU-m_cjg

https://jamboard.google.com/d/1LrnuUDZEZrgZ5dpib4jWrVnLIH6zxusf-EEH2xetw6E/edit?usp=sharing