

# Emojis in EFL Communication: An Analysis of the Language-Like Functions in Emoji Use by Saudi Female Learners

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**Abstract**—Emojis are fast becoming an integral part of communication and taking the shape of a ‘language’ in its own right. This raises pertinent questions as to the future look of formal digital communication and the purposes for which this visual input is used by EFL learners. This mixed methods study investigated what prompts female EFL learners at Qassim University to use emojis, the communicative functions they fulfill, and whether their use hinders or facilitates communication. A WhatsApp group was created. A total of 21 female students were added to the group. The researcher observed their chat for 4 weeks. An interview was also used to collect data on the purposes and functions of using emojis. Results indicate that there are nine broad functions that are fulfilled by emojis when used by EFL learners: expression of emotions, enhancing tone, visual quotient, regional variations, efficient communication, creativity, word substitution, peer prompt, and playfulness. Further, irrespective of the purpose of emoji use, the participants see it as an enhancement of their English communication on a formal platform, and that fears that visuals can fully replace the text for foreign language learners are totally unfounded. This study recommends the investigation of using emojis for developing students' autonomy.

**Index Terms**—adult learning, communication, emoji, EFL classroom, function

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mere printed words are no longer comprising transmission of message. Demir (2011) figured this out and broke down the components of ‘communication’ into different components in face-to-face exchanges: 55% nonverbal, 38% vocal, and 7% words. Analyzed carefully, this conclusion means that **mere words** as in the written form, constitute only limited portion of the message as the face-to-face element is totally missing in this. The huge gap in communication is somewhat bridged by visuals (Al-Ahdal, 2013; Wang et al., 2019). Visual elements in communication refer to any of the non-textual components that are used to convey meaning, enhance understanding, or evoke emotions in various forms of communication. Visual elements enhance communication by appealing to our visual senses, aiding in understanding, making information more memorable, and adding emotional depth to messages. Visual elements are especially important in digital communication, where face-to-face cues like body language and tone of voice are absent (Sun & Zhu, 2022).

Among visual inputs in communication are emojis and similar tools such as GIFs in WhatsApp; they have emerged as compelling additions to online conversations. Moreover, the history of emojis is not all that new as GenX would like to portray (Shah & Tewari, 2021). The hieroglyphic scripts of the ancient civilizations used images to convey a thought, an idea, or an object (Sergeant, 2019). More recently, in the computer age, the QWERTY keyboard features were modified to add warmth of facial expressions to otherwise drab ‘conversations’ or where words failed to convey the precise emotion. It is notable however, that the emoji culture came into its true element in the past few years when ‘friends’ became increasingly virtual with the popularity of Facebook and texting invaded the physical world of communication (Zhou et al., 2017). The contemporary world is increasingly adapting itself to optimize the use of technology in communication from status, story, and bio updates on some applications, to ‘textese’, the special language of texting on others. Whatever the application or its feature, the aim is to express oneself more clearly in the immediacy of the moment and without the natural handicap that accompanies the written word. Through technology and its massively dynamic forms, the learning process takes on another dimension wherein the world itself is the learning space rather than the four walls of the classroom. The onus to use tech resources like never before, adding relevance and depth to learning, and exchange of ideas with infinite possibilities, can all become a reality when teachers are in step with the tech savvy generations that come to the contemporary lecture halls. Emoji is a relatively new area of research and with many unexplored aspects in its use in language learning. This study focuses on answering the following questions on the use of emojis by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia:

### **Research questions**

1. What are the purposes and frequency of emoji use by Saudi EFL learners on a formal communication platform (WhatsApp EFL group)?

2. Does emoji use enhance or hinder the communication of Saudi EFL learners?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication is a linguistic act, its etymology lies in the Latin term 'communicare' or 'communico', they both mean 'to share' (Yamamoto, 2019). This is an interesting fact as it implies that the mechanism of communication is commonly owned by at least two persons, it consists of symbols which are accepted and recognized by them to ensure the acquisition, exchange, storage, retrieval and processing of the shared information. It is, thus, a social act. Emoji refers to small images, icons, or symbols that are utilized in electronic communication platforms such as text messages, social media, email, and other text fields (Alshenqeeti, 2016). Users use such icons to add some emotions to the conversation. Shigetaka Kurita who was of Japanese origin, is credited with creating the first emoji in 1999 (Mitra et al., 2021). The current number of emojis in September 2021, is a staggering 3,633. However, this number is expected to grow as more and more emojis are introduced in the future (Olivier, 2022).

Many previous studies investigated the use of emoji in different settings including in China and Saudi Arabia, Zhou et al. (2017) examined how Chinese adults in rural, small-town, and urban settings creatively and ingeniously balanced the usage of emoji, stickers, and text in their mobile communication practices using both qualitative and quantitative data from 30 participants. The study also examined the design implications of the research for the HCI area, providing strategies for utilizing the non-textual communication behaviors unearthed in circumstances where merely communicating through text might not be sufficient.

Hu et al. (2017) studied the intentions and sentimental impact of emojis on social media platforms. Starting with the presumption that emojis are a popular new tool used in computer-mediated interactions for communicating nonverbal cues, this study first examined people's motivations for utilizing four categories of emojis—positive, neutral, negative, and non-facial—from the message sender's point of view. Thereafter it evaluated the levels of willingness to use various emoji kinds for seven common communication goals that people often rely on nonverbal clues for. In-depth statistical hypothesis testing revealed subtle distinctions between different emoji types in terms of intended applications in addition to reporting the popularity of the intentions. Second, the studied analyzed the sentimental effects of emojis and their duplicates on verbal messages from the standpoint of message recipients. The researchers thoroughly examined emoji adoption in CMC from the viewpoints of both message transmitters and receivers. To analyze the data gathered, two user studies were designed and comprehensive statistical assumptions tests were run on them. The results reveal that the most common purposes of emoji use are to express feelings, to strengthen expression, and to modify tone. Additionally, findings point to the small variations within emoji categories, such as the preference for negative over positive emojis for conveying emotion and neutral emojis for sarcasm. The study also investigated the interpretations that message receivers have of the emotion that emoticons suggest. Emojis and vocal communications are combined rather than being kept separate. Findings of the study demonstrate the diverse sentiment impacts of emojis: neither positive nor negative emojis have an impact on the sentiment of plain verbal communications that are positive or negative. Additionally, the findings imply that, in most instances, using two emojis does not convey a more powerful emotion than using only one. This interesting research offers insightful information about how to use emojis and throws more light on this type of nonverbal cue substitute that is becoming more and more common in conversations.

Arafah and Hasyim (2019) conducted a study on linguistic functions of emojis in social networking conversations. This study was focused on how emojis are used linguistically in WhatsApps social media chats. Barthes and Morris' semiotic methodology was applied in this case study. Online survey distribution and screenshots of emoji-heavy interactions on WA social media are the two approaches used to collect data. According to the study findings, emojis are grammatical components of language used in web-based communication. They serve as a sign vehicle, designatum, and interpreting relation in social media communication by producing syntactic, semantic, and paradigmatic emoji aspects of signs.

The findings of the investigation of Veytia-Bucheli (2020) show that graduate students are using emoticons more frequently in WhatsApp. The highest rates were found in the category of social interactions, demonstrating that for the students, perhaps the most crucial benefit of using emojis is to foster empathy, improve conversation quality, and boost confidence. The expression of sentiments, comprehending messages, and composing styles were additional categories. Emojis could be useful in this context to enhance social engagement in the instructional frameworks itself (designing an atmosphere of confidence, which is divided a space for dialogue that promotes social cohesion, and collaborative cooperation) within instructional situations and inside learning models in heterogeneous online and traditional domains. Educational technologists might be quite interested in these innovative training frameworks as these demand deeper investigation.

Alshenqeeti (2020) enunciated on Emojis in a socio-semiotic study on their emerging use. The goal of the study was to look at how and where emojis fit into language usage, and to specifically determine if these virtual pictograms—also known as logograms or ideographic symbols—reflected a more profound human desire for artistic expression that had been represented through pre-alphabet methods of communication, or whether they were the result of a new language created by a more technologically advanced generation. A quick analysis of older visual communication techniques revealed that the emojis that are used on a daily basis now have roots in pictographic representations of objects and emotions. Several early linguistic structures that started as visual representations of the users' surroundings can be

shown to have their representation of common items and emotions in a visual style. In addition, the evolution of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Sumerian Cuneiform over the centuries can be used to understand how emojis evolved from simple visuals to richer carriers of meaning through strings or combinations that do not require any text at all. This demonstrates that the "emoji language" is only a modern variation of an ancient method of conversation. In this sense, it may be claimed that emojis constitute a type of indirect language, giving individuals a way to code-speak with their own social circles. This aspect is what has led some people to believe that it is solely for the next generation, but preliminary research indicates that this is not the case. In fact, we may say that it is the openness of people towards technology and the creation that attracts users to add emojis during conversations and makes it more valuable and interesting to users.

Algaraady and Mahyoob (2021) worked on writing issues faced by EFL students during the usage of Emojis while communicating via social networking messages. The purpose of this investigation was to determine how emoji usage by EFL students affected their writing abilities and to emphasize the students' perspectives towards this emerging form of communication. The study explored various ways that emojis are used in social networking apps, the factors that have contributed to their increased use in casual conversation, and the extent to which their presence can supplant textual language. The findings demonstrate that the research variables' p-values are equal to 1, which is significantly larger than alpha, and that there is little variation in respondents' estimates of the parameters. This suggests that the utilization of emojis in texting has an impact on how individuals use language. Additionally, the results show that both standard and non-standard languages are seriously threatened by the use of emojis, short forms, contractions, and acronyms in text messaging. The findings of this investigation demonstrate that this new form of communication may eventually displace most of the dialects that social media users feel emojis best capture. This study also found that emoji use has a significant impact on interpersonal interaction, but that conventional writing abilities would have a negative impact on using these trending and emerging tools used in communication. We can see the consequences of these negative impacts by proven spelling, structural errors, and low expressions in EFL students while learning the real language.

Most recently, Cavalheiro et al. (2023) reported that emoji usage is frequently influenced by personal traits (such as gender, age, and personality), relational aspects (such as intimacy with particular others), reasons for using them (such as because emojis allow for better emotion expression), and the context in which they are used (for example, emoji usage is seen as more appropriate with close friends). When taken together, research has not yet looked at whether or how these factors are related to the frequency of emoji use. When taken together, it is also not clear whether or how these factors are related to the degree of emoji use. This study investigated the relative contributions of individual qualities, perceived relatedness to others, and motivations to explain the frequency of emoji use with various interlocutors in a correlational study (N = 444). Being younger, having a higher conscientiousness score, and using emoji for personal interaction were all associated with more frequent usage of emoji with close interlocutors (such as family and friends), according to hierarchical linear regressions. Age, a lower agreeableness rating, and a perception of greater relational intimacy, on the other hand, were indicators of emoji use frequency with more distant interlocutors (such as supervisors and doctors). The overall findings demonstrate the necessity of taking into consideration several variables at various levels to investigate emoji usage patterns in digital conversation.

### III. METHODS

#### *Research design*

The study adopted a mixed methods approach with observation and interviews forming the two data axes. In collaboration with the regular EFL faculty in the BA program at the Department of English and Translation, Qassim University, in the second semester of academic year 2022-2023.

#### *Participants*

A WhatsApp group was created expressly for assignments related queries, clarifications, and submissions. It included 21 fresher female learners aged between 18-20 years. The researcher explained the learners the aim behind the creation of the WhatsApp group and asked their consent to copy their daily conversation in the group. Students hugely welcomed the idea as any technological intervention immediately resonates with them. Spread over the entire semester, the researcher maintained a daily record of emojis finding place in the group messages and summed up the data at the end of the designated four week period.

#### *Data collection*

Quantitative data in the form of observation of emoji use were gathered and collated with responses received in the personal interviews. The leading themes that emerged in the interviews were then identified and summarized with each of the nine purposes for which Saudi EFL female learners use emojis. The researcher was one of the group participants and thus, had access to first-hand primary data. Analysis of messages over a period of four weeks collated with personal interview data helped identify nine purposes where the participants replaced language with emojis.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**RQ1: What are the purposes and frequency of emoji use by Saudi EFL learners on a formal communication platform (WhatsApp EFL group)?**

Table 1 depicts the distribution of emoji use by EFL learners at Qassim university in a WhatsApp group created for the express purpose of assignment related queries and information exchange. In all there were 1396 occurrences of emojis in the four-week period. Their purpose and frequency of occurrence are summarized in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1  
PURPOSES AND FREQUENCY OF EMOJI USE

| Purpose                 | Frequency of use |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| Expression of emotions  | 325              |
| Enhancing tone          | 216              |
| Visual quotient         | 248              |
| Regional variations     | 119              |
| Efficient communication | 90               |
| Creativity              | 63               |
| Word substitution       | 247              |
| Peer prompt             | 52               |
| Playfulness             | 36               |

Table 1 displays the 9 purposes of using emojis. They are expression of emotions, visual quotient, word substitution, enhancing tone, regional variations, efficient communication, creativity, peer prompt and playfulness. The researcher then interviewed the participants asking them the function of using emojis in their communication.

1. **Expression of Emotions:** One-to-one interview revealed Emojis help convey emotions and feelings in text-based conversations, which can often be challenging to do through words alone. They add nuance and context to the message, making it easier to understand the sender's emotional state. As can be seen in the data, the maximally occurring (325) emojis are for the purpose of expression of emotions which is understandable as the participants were to use only English for communication on the group and not permitted to resort to mother tongue at any cost. Expression of emotions in a foreign language (English in this case) can be a big hindrance, rather, a handicap, in communication, and by resorting to emojis, the participants overcame the problem. Under this purpose, only the face emojis such as 😊, 😄, 😁 were used by the participants.
2. **Visual quotient:** The closest runner up to the tone enhancement purpose of emoji use is visual quotient (248), that is use of emojis to make the message more appealing to the reader even though the lexical composition is adequate for the purpose, and it was characterized by the use of neutral emojis such as 🤔 and 🌴. Emojis make messages visually appealing and engaging. They can break up long blocks of text and add colour and personality to conversations. In short, this purpose occurred where the message was anyhow conveyed even without the emoji, but the emoji was added to make the messaging look less menacing and boring.
3. **Word substitution:** Very close to visual purpose was that of word substitution (247), and data reveal that language deficit is hardly the reason for this as the words being substituted are basic to the EFL vocabulary such as the finger sign 🖐 for the pronoun 'this', ✈ for travel, and ⌚ for time running out. Used in this sense, this purpose can be seen as a conjugate of the earlier two functions, i.e. word substitution for expression and visual quotient.
4. **Enhancing Tone:** Emojis can be used to clarify the tone of a message. For example, adding a smiley face 😊 can indicate that a message is meant to be friendly or light-hearted, whereas a stern face 😠 may indicate frustration or seriousness. The function enhancing the tone of the message (216) came at a close second and since emojis are used here to 'enhance', it does not necessarily convey language deficit as the reason of emoji use.
5. **Regional variations:** Emojis can bridge cultural and language barriers by providing universally understood symbols. A thumbs-up 👍, for instance, generally signifies approval or agreement, regardless of the recipient's language or culture. Object names (119) come at a distant fifth position in purpose of emoji use. One of the unique features in the usage by the EFL learners in this study was the use of the crown 👑 and the typically Arab emoji which are regional ways of expressing appreciation and humility in requests respectively. Such usage betrays the 'inner circle' or 'shared' meaning as for an outsider it may be confusing to interpret their application.
6. **Efficient communication:** *A picture is worth a thousand words.* Emojis can convey complex ideas or sentiments succinctly. Instead of writing out a detailed explanation, a single emoji can convey a message effectively. In some cases in the data emojis (90) have replaced phrases such as in the use of the 🔥 symbol which is used by some participants to represent something exciting or impressive, the others are the more universal thumbs-up 👍 which generally signifies approval or agreement.
7. **Creativity:** People enjoy using emojis to be playful and creative in their conversations. They can create unique combinations of emojis to express specific thoughts or ideas. For instance, some participants used an unusual combination (63) of pleasant emojis such as single flowers, a bouquet or bunch of flowers and leaves together to express their support for an idea. Another participant used the 🌸 emoji when the teacher appreciated her assignment inputs, yet another used the Japanese alphanumeric 🎉, which translates to 'congratulations'. She disclosed that she was learning Japanese online!

8. **Peer prompt:** The use of emojis has become a social norm in many online and text-based interactions. People use them because others do, and it's a way to conform to the established norms of digital communication. Peer prompts constituted a relatively smaller (52) number of purposes in the current study.
9. **Playfulness:** Some individuals develop their own emoji "language" or style, using specific emojis that have fun meaning within their social circles or relationships. Emoji use for playfulness (36) constituted a small portion of the data. During the interviews, however, participants admitted that they practice this more freely in informal groups such as with friends and close relatives, but the presence of the teacher and the researcher inhibited this purpose in the group.

The study found 9 purposes of using emojis. They are expression of emotions, visual quotient, word substitution, enhancing tone, regional variations, efficient communication, creativity, peer prompt and playfulness. These findings are in line with Hu et al. (2017). They concluded that the most common purposes of emoji use are to express feelings, to strengthen expression, and to modify tone. Additionally, findings point to the small variations within emoji categories, such as the preference for negative over positive emojis for conveying emotion and neutral emojis for sarcasm. This fact is also proven by the findings of the current study as participant exchanges show a certain shared knowledge of the emojis, not only in the sense of the regular meaning that some of them imply, but also, so far as the irregular but 'inner circle' use of some unconventional emojis is concerned. During the communication process here, for example, a participant who is the sender of the message selects the symbol of fire/ flame (🔥) to imply appreciation for a unique or exciting idea, a usage which is out of the ordinary but is clearly understood by the recipient of the message. This intention came to light when the researcher interviewed the participants who had used such unconventional emojis. It was deemed by the participant to fit the situation and concretized the meaning which she could not do in English for lack of adequate proficiency. Emojis thus, fulfil certain social and/ or individual communication needs to fill in for language deficit. Similarly, at the receiver's end, those symbols are identified within the shared paradigm of recognition and realization of the meaning intended by the speaker. It is to be noted that the symbols may evolve arbitrarily but always within the paradigm of 'sharedness' (as in the case of 🔥) due to factors such as intellectual, emotional, and psychological needs.

#### **RQ2: Does emoji use enhance or hinder the communication of Saudi EFL learners?**

The participants unanimously agreed that 'emoji use did not hinder their communication in any way nor did they see it as an escape from language use'. 12 of the respondents added that they would rather use other apps such as the online dictionaries and translation apps than to resort to emojis in place of language as they understood that such visual input was not part of real life formal communication. **The second emerging theme** was that the EFL learners used the emojis only to shoulder emotional overload, that is, when they felt well-defined positive or negative emotions and needed to enhance the textual message. On the other hand, they least used emojis to convey information as they were apprehensive of how the visual may be interpreted by the recipient. Both the findings in this study, thus, indicate that language proficiency deficit is not the motivating factor in the EFL learners' use of emojis and that emojis are not moving towards replacing words, at least, not in the Saudi EFL learner base. Findings also showed that emoji use did not hinder their communication in any way nor did they see it as an escape from language use. This finding disagrees with Algaraady and Mahyoob (2021) who found that that the utilization of emojis in texting has an impact on how individuals use language. Additionally, the results show that both standard and non-standard languages are seriously threatened by the use of emojis. The frame of reference for the process of emojis usage is the communication environment. With a great deal of social and global advancement, the need arose to match these with the developments in efficient techniques of communication.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In the digital age, Emojis have qualified from the social media lexicon to mainstream communication and have evolved beyond traditional text-based exchanges to incorporate a diverse array of visual elements. This research delved into the fascinating realm of communication dynamics, aiming to illuminate the nuanced role that emojis play in shaping understanding within virtual communicative exchanges. As the digital landscape continues to expand, uncovering the intricacies of how learners utilize these visual components to either enrich or impede comprehension is likely to hold significant implications for effective online communication. This study explored the multifaceted dimensions of this phenomenon, shedding light on the ways in which these visual cues contribute to the intricate tapestry of virtual interaction. Through a meticulous investigation, the researcher gained deeper insights into how these seemingly minor elements wield considerable influence on the intricacies of conveying meaning in the modern digital discourse.

Emojis are being hailed as setting the standard for the growth of visual communication for exchanging ideas and knowledge, and they are progressively becoming a part of the lexicon that many of today's children are familiar with and regularly use. Although research suggests that their use can aid in explaining or deciphering communications, a number of obstacles have prevented their widespread use in feedback and communication in education. To ensure that the intended meaning of an emoji is conveyed, organizations that incorporate emojis for branding and marketing, including Pepsi, MTV, and Burger King, depend upon specially produced emoticons that their customers can recognize and use in their text messages. Customers utilize these emoticons when talking to their friends and family in addition to

choosing and ordering products and offering feedback on services. Emoji usage in institutions of higher learning needs to be just as purpose- and meaning-driven as its popular business application, and designers of instruction need to identify and create a set of emojis specifically made to support contemporary social-constructivist learning. The following are recommended based on the study findings:

1. Emojis are not a 'language' yet but that does not discount their large presence amongst the EFL learners' communication. It is important that EFL learners be sensitized to the cultural aspects of using emojis.
2. Quasi-language such as emojis can be fun for learners in the EFL classroom and teachers should design activities that use this fact for language learning.
3. Emojis can be used as great ice-breakers in teaching the more challenging skills such as writing by devising tasks such as story composition using emojis.

Though a unique study, its inclusion of only female learners was an unavoidable limitation. It is hoped that future replications will design mixed gender studies with a larger number of participants for more reliable results.

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