

## Emoji and written language: possibilities of application and development in first and foreign languages

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### Abstract

This work explores the possibilities of applying emoji as visual elements of a conceptual nature to the development of writing in academic contexts for both first and foreign languages. The results are focused on the analysis of 620 emoji embedded in comments made by students (N=18) of the Degree in Primary Education (2019-20) of the University of Cádiz, Spain, in Spanish and English, respectively, on eight pictures uploaded to the Instagram social network. These emoji are classified in eight categories according to Emojipedia, exhibiting similar behaviour in both languages concerning three main focuses of analysis: distribution, uses and utterances (DANESI, 2016). The study ends by justifying the manifestly conceptual value of emoji, with a look at their didactic applications to the teaching of first and foreign languages and to the development of writing skills in Primary Education, for example, as elements which enhance the meaning of the text.

### Keywords

Emoji. Written language. Mother tongue instruction. Foreign language instruction.

### Emoji e expressão escrita: possibilidades de aplicação e desenvolvimento em línguas maternas e estrangeiras

### Resumo

Este trabalho explora as possibilidades de aplicar emoji como elementos visuais com natureza conceitual ao desenvolvimento da escrita em ambientes acadêmicos para línguas maternas e estrangeiras. Os resultados estão focados na análise de 620 emojis embutidos nos comentários feitos por estudantes (N=18) da licenciatura em Educação Primária (2019-2020) da Universidade de Cádiz, Espanha, em espanhol e inglês, respectivamente, em oito fotos enviadas à rede social Instagram. Estes emojis são classificados em oito categorias de acordo com a Emojipedia, mostrando comportamento semelhante em ambas as línguas a partir de três focos principais de análise: *distribution*, *uses* e *utterances* (DANESI, 2016). O estudo termina justificando o valor manifestamente conceitual dos emojis, podendo vislumbrar suas aplicações didáticas ao ensino da língua materna e de línguas estrangeiras e ao desenvolvimento da escrita no Ensino Fundamental, por exemplo, como elementos que valorizam o significado do texto.

### Palavras-chave

Emoji. Língua escrita. Ensino da língua materna. Ensino da língua estrangeira.

## **Emoji y expresión escrita: posibilidades de aplicación y desarrollo en lenguas materna y extranjera**

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo explora las posibilidades de aplicación de emoji como elementos visuales con naturaleza conceptual al desarrollo de la escritura en ámbitos académicos para lenguas materna y extranjera. Los resultados se centran en el análisis de 620 emoji insertados en comentarios realizados por estudiantes (N=18) del Grado en Educación Primaria (2019-2020) de la Universidad de Cádiz, España, en español e inglés, respectivamente, sobre ocho fotos subidas a la red social Instagram. Estos emoji se clasifican en ocho categorías según la Emojipedia, mostrando un comportamiento similar en las dos lenguas a partir de tres focos de análisis principales: *distribution*, *uses* y *utterances* (DANESI, 2016). El estudio termina justificando el valor manifiestamente conceptual de los emoji, pudiéndose atisbar sus aplicaciones didácticas a la enseñanza de lenguas materna y extranjera, así como al desarrollo de las habilidades de escritura en Educación Primaria, por ejemplo, como elementos que potencian el significado del texto.

### **Palabras clave**

Emoji. Lengua escrita. Enseñanza de la lengua materna. Enseñanza de idiomas.

## **1 Introduction**

One of the characteristics pointed out by Prensky (2010) about digital natives, as opposed to digital immigrants, is the preference of natives for graphics instead of texts. Within this broad sense of 'graphics', emoji are found. The generation in which this study takes place is undoubtedly made by digital natives raised among computers. This Generation Z is defined "[...] by moments and events that make them a group, characterized by their habits and consumption" (ÁLVAREZ; HEREDIA; ROMERO, 2019, p. 9; personal translation). Thus, the greatest indisputable habit that distinguishes this generational group is the use of emoji.

The very first emoji "[...] were developed in the late 1990s in Japan for use in the world's first mobile-phone internet System, then under development by Japanese telecommunications Company NTT DoCoMo" (EVANS, 2017, p. 19). Since then, emoji have spread around the world in an unstoppable and relentless way, constituting an indispensable communication element. Therefore, "[...] we are beginning to sense [...] that the traditional forms of language and writing are no longer able to carry out thought in the ways of the past" (DANESI, 2016, p. 88). From this point of view, Evans (2017)

had asked whether society is facing a new universal language, which implies a heated controversy among researchers, who discuss its visual rhetorical character concerning semantics (JIBRIL; ABDULLAH, 2013). Meanwhile, others deny the emoji's nature as an independent and universal language because of its meaning in a context (ZHOU; HENTSCHEL; KUMAR, 2017). However, and considering the perspectives raised so far, emoji are included in the texts, taking into account its hybrid nature (DANESI, 2016).

In line with these ideas, it is necessary to emphasize the concept of multimodality, where emoji are included as one more element, according to López Peña's (2020, p. 6; personal translation): “[...] a discipline that deals with the meaning that is created through the different configurations and combinations that image, gesture, look, body posture, sound, writing, typography, music, or speech, among other elements, can have in the same message”.

In these configurations and combinations “[...] people interact by editing, sharing, reading, and reacting to a great variety of graphic texts, videos, photos, and songs that reflect our everyday relationships” (BOA SORTE, 2019, p. 52), erecting the emoji as a vital element in multi-modal relationships and reactions.

So, the debate about the use of technology in school classrooms can be organized by considering that “[...] the same digital technology that produced the changes in our students also provides the tools to finally implement the most effective and real forms of learning” (PRENSKY, 2011, p. 9; personal translation). It is then considered that the debate is over, although the use of other unusual strategies in language and academic texts regarding the development of written skills in pre-service teachers' training including the use of emoji both in first (L1) and second (L2) language is not. In this sense, there are some examples of the use of emoji with a didactic purpose; for example, certain challenges that invite to guess one specific piece of literary work from a series of emoji; or the proposal of some teachers to evaluate the students by using a grading with emoji. However, these are isolated practices that avoid the fact that emoji are “[...] further expanding the human potential to communicate” (EVANS, 2017, p. 14). Thus, no discursive genre can dodge emoji, even in the comments uploaded on social networks.

Considering this all from a theoretical point of view, two main research objectives are established:

- O.1. To determine if emoji can be used as a resource for the development of written language in formal academic contexts.
- O.2. To examine the use of emoji in non-academic texts, such as comments on Instagram, both in Spanish as L1 and in English as L2.
- Two specific objectives are resulting from O.2, according to the implications of emoji as active elements in non-academic texts: O.2.1. To analyze the syntactic application of emoji in non-academic texts as substitutes or adjuncts in L1 and L2; and O.2.2. To consider the use of emoji in non-academic texts as enhancers of the emotional meaning behind the texts themselves.
- This research helps to contextualize a potential contribution within the framework of pre-service Primary Education teachers, as well as the application of emoji to the teaching of written language in L1 and L2. This aims at establishing two hypotheses:
  - H.1. The use of emoji can contribute to the development of written language from the transition of non-academic texts to academic texts in L1 and L2.
  - H.2. There are no significant differences in terms of emoji use regardless of whether the texts are written in L1 or L2.

As well as for the objectives, two more hypotheses arise from H.2: H.2.1. Emoji are mainly used as text substitutes in non-academic writings in L1 and L2; and H.2.2. The use of emoji is conceptual since they are included in the texts to enhance its meaning.

## 2 Methodology

This evidence-based study is twofold: correlational and explanatory. First, it means determining the degree of relationship between the variables (i) number of emoji and (ii) the purpose of emoji and language use. Second, it helps to clarify the reasons behind the relationships between the variables (i) and (ii), as well as to shed light on their specific circumstances.

Moreover, this mixed-method research (HERNÁNDEZ SAMPIERI; FERNÁNDEZ COLLADO; BAPTISTA LUCIO, 2016) is developed from the gathering of quantitative data

related to the emoji (N=620) included in individual comments by the participants in eight pictures uploaded to the application/social network Instagram between February 19 and April 22, 2020, carried out in L1 and L2. Also, qualitative data were collected through a virtual forum once the quantitative information was analyzed. Informants' opinions revolve around the use of emoji, which represents an important part of their usual digital interactions (DANESI, 2016). In summary, the methodological process begins with the collecting of the emoji; the analysis of the emoji use; and the verification of the results taking into consideration the participants' opinions.

Informants (N=18) constitute almost the whole student group (94.74%) that attended (80.00% of the classes) the subject *Competencia Comunicativa en Lengua Extranjera II (Inglés)* during 2019-20. This subject is taught in the eighth and last semester of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education in the foreign language (English)/CLIL specialization at the University of Cadiz (UCA), Spain. 88.89% of the students are women (N=16), while only 11.11% are men (N=2). In terms of language subjects, all students are native speakers of Spanish, except for one bilingual student with full command of Spanish and English. Also, 55.56% (N=10) has a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2002), while 27.78% (N=5) has a B2 level. The remaining students (N=2) have C1 and C2 levels, respectively, while one more student does not have any official language accreditation yet. It is worth noting that all UCA students must obtain a minimum level of B1 in any foreign language (English, French, German...) to obtain a Bachelor's Degree.

The research tools that were used for data gathering are defined next. Firstly, as for the students' Instagram comments, the authors opened a new user account on the social network since Instagram itself states that "[...] around 40 percent of the messages contain at least one emoji" (DANESI, 2016, p. 45). This account profile was given the name of the subject (*Competencia Comunicativa en Lengua Extranjera II (Inglés)*) itself, while the students were asked to open an Instagram account specifically for this project. As seen in the picture below (Figure 1), some pictures from the free page <https://pixabay.com/> were taken so the students could comment on them:



**Source:** Instagram (2020).

Concerning the second research tool, a forum was opened in the University of Cadiz Virtual Campus Taking this virtual forum into account, the students' focus group was set up.

The data collection is based on the presentation of eight pictures uploaded to Instagram for eight consecutive weeks. These were initially classified as positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the feelings that could be aroused among the informants. The topics chosen were intended to illustrate current situations known to all students; for example, the COVID-19 pandemic. The students' comments were restricted to 150 words, apart from the alternation of languages: Spanish and English. Table 1 shows the timing of the activity within eight weeks:

**Table 1 – Timing**

Weeks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Neutral	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Positive		✓				✓		
Negative				✓				✓

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

Once the pictures were commented on, the number of emoji by each student in L1 and L2 was counted. Then, the emoji were classified according to the categories established by the Emojipedia<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Danesi's (2016) "grammar of emoji" was analyzed according to the following: distribution, uses, and utterances.

Finally, the study aimed at corroborating the data obtained with the informants' opinions through the virtual forum

### 3 Results and discussions

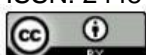
The participants who commented on the four pictures in L1 are 18. Except for two students (12 and 18), the rest participated in the whole activity. The total number of emoji used in L1 is 327, with an average of 4.59 emoji/comment, with minimum and maximum ranges between 0 and 23. The exponential use of the number of emoji/image is worth highlighting: from 21 to 144. The pictures commented on in L1 are considered as neutral (+/-). Table 2 includes information about the use of emoji in L1:

**Table 2 – Emoji used in L1**

Student	Picture	1 (+/-)	3 (+/-)	5 (+/-)	7 (+/-)	Average
1	4	0	0	0	0	0,00
2	4	0	1	8	10	4,75
3	4	1	4	7	9	5,25
4	4	0	0	12	23	8,75
5	4	0	6	7	9	5,50
6	4	0	1	8	14	5,75
7	4	0	7	17	22	11,50
8	4	0	8	1	3	3,00
9	4	4	4	0	3	2,75
10	4	0	2	1	2	1,25
11	4	2	0	7	4	3,25
12	1	0	-	-	-	0,00
13	4	10	4	5	1	5,00
14	4	0	4	9	8	5,25
15	4	1	8	11	16	9,00
16	4	1	3	5	13	5,50
17	4	2	0	2	7	2,75
18	3	0	2	8	.	3,33
		21	54	108	144	4,59

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://emojipedia.org/>. Access on: Oct. 10, 2020.



The 18 students also took part in commenting on the pictures in L2, although only six of them commented on the four images. The total number of emoji used in the four pictures is 293. Unlike in L1, the emoji/picture average number is 6.20, with a significant increase between the first and second pictures (+67). The images commented on in L2 imply positive (+) and negative (-) types. Table 3 shows the data:

**Table 3 – Emoji used in LE**

Student	Picture	2 (+)	4 (-)	6 (+)	8 (-)	Average
1	2	0	0	-	-	0,00
2	1	7	-	-	-	7,00
3	4	1	11	11	10	8,25
4	1	-	17	-	-	17,00
5	3	-	9	6	13	9,33
6	3	0	4	-	11	5,00
7	1	-	-	-	12	12,00
8	3	-	3	0	11	4,67
9	2	2	14	-	-	8,00
10	4	0	3	3	1	1,75
11	1	0	-	-	-	0,00
12	4	1	0	8	3	3,00
13	4	0	5	22	0	6,75
14	3	-	7	6	2	5,00
15	4	8	9	13	8	9,50
16	4	5	3	13	14	8,75
17	3	3	0	-	0	1,00
18	3	0	9	5	-	4,67
		27	94	87	85	6,20

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

The Emojipedia categories are similar between L1 and L2. In the first position, the Smileys & People category stands out: 44.65% and 45.73%, respectively. The rest of the categories are distributed in a similar way as seen in Table 4:

**Table 4 – Emoji clasificados por categorías según la Emojipedia**

	L1		LE	
Smileys & People	146	44,65%	134	45,73%
Animals & Nature	49	14,98%	44	15,02%
Travel & Places	45	13,76%	41	13,99%
Objects	41	12,54%	32	10,92%
Symbols	36	11,01%	31	10,58%
Activity	5	1,53%	7	2,39%
Food & drink	4	1,22%	3	1,02%
Flags	1	0,31%	1	0,34%
	327		293	

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).



As for “the emoji grammar” (DANESI, 2016), it is worth noting the similarity between languages in terms of distribution. Both in L1 and L2, the participants opt for the use of the emoji to represent an emotional meaning in the same place of the text where it is found or semantic with 64.26% and 77.09%, respectively; for example, “*Una familia muy unida* 🧑🧒”, in L1; and “The scary COVID-19 comes to our minds 😬”, in LE. Secondly, they use the emoji to enhance the meanings that have been indicated or reinforced verbally in L1 (30.04%) and L2 (24.67%), respectively; for example, “😬 *Añoro esos momentos con todos mis primos*”, in L1; and “We have been locked up 🏠”, in LE. The last position corresponds to the emoji inserted in sentences where punctuation marks or formulae of greeting are found or syntactic with 5.70% in L1 (no case was registered in L2); for example, “(raza, etnias, culturas, capacidades, características...) 👁”:

**Table 5 – Distribution**

	L1		LE	
Semantic	169	64,26%	175	77,09%
Reinforcing	79	30,04%	56	24,67%
Syntactic	15	5,70%	0	0,00%
	263		231	

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

The uses of the emoji are almost completely carried out adjunctively to the texts in L1 and L2, with 83.27% and 98.70%, respectively; for example, “*Quédate en casa* 🏠👨👩”, in L1; and “Despite all the people affected by COVID-19 🙌👨”, in L2. In contrast, emoji are hardly present as a text substitutive in L1 (16.73%) or L2 (1.30%); for example, “*Futura profesión:* 🧑”, in L1; and “To clap the 🙌”, in L2:

**Tabla 6 – Uses**

	L1		LE	
Adjunctively	219	83,27%	228	98,70%
Sustitutive	44	16,73%	3	1,30%
	263		231	

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

Regarding the emoji's phatic function, the distribution of utterances remains similar for both languages. Only 19.47% in L1 and 21.16% in L2 of the emoji fall into this

category. First, emoji act as elements representing a formula of farewell utterance ending for 70.31% and 75.81% in L1 and L2, respectively; for example, “*Aprenderemos sin duda alguna.* 😊”, in L1; and “We'll see each other soon! 🙌👫💕💕”, in L2. Second, emoji are used as an element that is intended to call the attention of the reader or utterance opener, although these cases are limited to 21.88% in L1 and 24.19% in L2; for example, “🗨️🏠👉💕 *Inevitablemente esta fotografía me recuerda a la emergencia sanitaria que estamos sufriendo en la actualidad*”, in L1; and “👁️ This publication reminds me of...”, in L2. Third, the emoji are inserted in the text with the aim of silence avoiding, with 7.81% in L1, while no cases in L2 were observed; for example, “*Hay anécdotas por descubrir en ese lugar* 🗨️🏢👉”:

**Table 7 – Utterances**

	L1		LE	
	Ending	45	70,31%	47
Openinig	14	21,88%	15	24,19%
Silence avoiding	5	7,81%	0	0,00%
	64		62	

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

As said, a virtual forum was managed from which the discussion group for this research was constituted. 16 of the 18 students participated in this forum. The following are both the questions and the topics that have been extracted from the categorization of the students' answers: “1. When you use emoji in social networks, such as Instagram, for example, or in chat or messaging applications, how do you define your style (do you group the emoji? Do you repeat them?)?”; “2. Have you noticed any difference in the use of emoji between commenting on the Instagram pictures in L1 or L2?”; “3. According to the analysis of your Instagram comments, emojis are used more often to emphasize verbs in L1 and nouns in L2. To what extent do you think L1 and L2 influence the use of emoji?”; “4. From a syntactic point of view (the organization of words to form correct sentences), emoji do not usually substitute the elements of a sentence (for example, words or punctuation marks) both in L1 and especially in L2, according to the analysis of your comments in Instagram. Why do you think this happens?”; 5. Although the type of texts analyzed in the Instagram activity does not imply the widespread use of emoji to ‘avoid silences’ or to finish a sentence or conversation, some examples have been collected in L1, but not in LE. What do you

think is influenced by the preference of one language or another to make this happen?"; "6. About the analysis of your comments on Instagram pictures, emoji in L1 serve as substitutes for words or expressions more often than in L2. How do you think the degree of knowledge of L2 affects the use of emoji?"; "7. In relation to the previous question, do you think that the dominant culture of a person determines the use of one or another emoji?"; "8. Do you think emoji can be used in L1 teaching? In what ways?"; and "9. Do you think that emoji can be used in L2 teaching? In what ways?".

*Emoji are essential for virtual life.* Regarding the first question, it is worth pointing out that eight students (50.00%) use the same emoji, using the keyboard 'frequently and recent' emoji tool, while two students (12.50%) indicate that "I would not know how to live a virtual life without using emoji" (student 11, personal communication, May 12, 2020) and that "I do not know if we could live without emoji" (student 14, personal communication, May 12, 2020). Another student directly catalogs the use of emoji as "indispensable" (student 7, personal communication, May 12, 2020). Only two students (12.50%) confess not to make frequent use of the emoji, being one of them who argues to use them only "To qualify what is said" (student 10, personal communication, May 12, 2020).

As for the remaining students, their use of emoji is normally done in social networks (N=6), repeating WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram as the preferred ones. Only two informants (12.50%) report having emoji preferences for some specific social networks: "I use emoji to nuance messages, without repeating the emoji, looking for a harmonic message" (student 15, personal communication, May 12, 2020).

As to why emoji are used, seven students report (43.75%) using them to reinforce or represent feelings, including one who states, "The amount of emoji depends on the degree of intensity of the emotion" (student 15, personal communication, May 12, 2020; personal translation). Also, six of them (37.50%) use them to replace words –whether obvious or not– and to facilitate understanding and clarify meaning. It is also interesting that two of them (12.50%) indicate that their use is decreasing and is being replaced by the use of stickers and GIFs, as they think they clarify more the messages.

Despite the great use of the emoji made by students, it is important to know that four of them (25.00%) repeat the idea that the use of emoji is not widely accepted in

formal situations or with people they do not know and, above all, in specific more formal contexts, such as work, for example.

*Emoji to express feelings.* In the second question, 11 informants (68.75%) answered “no”, compared to five who said “yes”. Among the reasons given by those who answered “yes”, it can be seen that they associate it with the fact that they often use English in formal situations, where emoji are not used. One of them (6.25%) also expresses that the use of the emoji is associated with feelings or thoughts, that is, with the more emotional aspect of the language. Therefore, it is more frequent in L1. The simultaneous use of the emoji is also manifested in L1, while in L2 the students first write the commentary and then add the emoji: “In English, it was more difficult to express what I wanted to say, so it was more difficult to find an emoji” (student 10, personal communication, May 12, 2020).

Related to the informants who responded that they had not noticed the difference, different answers were found: “Emoji are universal and were created to give solutions to the problems of written language” (student 2, personal communication, May 12, 2020; personal translation) or “If we understand what we write, we must know what emoji is necessary for each situation” (student 7, personal communication, May 12, 2020; personal translation). Two of them (12.50%) show a forced use of the emoji, while another one states that the real difficult thing was the topic itself.

*Complexity in the formality of L1 and L2 for the use of the emoji.* From the third question, four informants (25.00%) do not think there is a difference. Even so, three other participants point out (18.75%) the use of nouns in L2 to facilitate understanding. Besides, four informants state (25.00%) that, since Spanish is their L1, it implies that they are capable of representing more complex and much simpler actions in L2 (use of the noun), insisting that it is not the language itself that influences, but the grasp they have of it. Also, there are interesting scenarios, such as the fact that the formality of L2 does not lead to the natural use of the emoji in which the previous answers were emphasized: that verbs indicate action and in L1 it is always represented to perform activities with the emoji; that the study of syntax has been limited to L1 and not to L2; or that they have found a very intensive study of the lexicon in L2.

*Emoji as complements and formality in the written format.* Considering the fourth question, thirteen informants (81.25%) indicate that the main cause is the use of emoji as a complement and not as a substitute. Of these answers, some difference this main idea from another such as the ambiguity of some of the emoji or the difficulty of the reading process if a substitution instead of a complement is produced. Also, four (25.00%) of the students emphasize the formality of the writing, which makes it difficult to substitute elements of the sentence.

*The academic and formal character of the L2 and naturalness in the use of the L1.* Concerning the fifth question, all the informants basically agree on two main ideas: the academic and formal character of the L2 and the naturalness in the use of the L1. Besides, other ideas are highlighted, such as the fact that emoji are linked to cultural practices in all languages and the mastery or not of one language or another.

*The level of knowledge of L2 affects the use of emoji and the obviousness of the culture concerning its use.* According to the sixth question, the sixteen informants (100.00%) agree that the level of knowledge affects the use of emoji. Five of them (31.25%) emphasize that it is due to the accommodation of the speech for its understanding, although other interesting ideas are pointed out such as the use of emoji for a better understanding of the text, the lack of knowledge of cultural aspects linked to an L2, or the lack of knowledge of the use of the L2 in formal and informal contexts.

Linked to this idea, in question seven, the sixteen informants (100.00%) determine that it does affect, mentioning reasons such as the distinction between generations of users or that “The use or not of the emoji will depend on the respect one has for the intermediary” (student 14, personal communication, May 12, 2020; personal translation). However, it is surprising that in this question the informants do not make very deep reflections on the character of the emoji and its use concerning the user’s culture.

*Didactic strategies and inclusion of the emoji in L1 and L2.* Finally, in the eighth question, the sixteen informants (100.00%) agree again that the emoji can be used as a didactic resource. Of them, eight (50.00%) state that it could be worked in emotional education or personality development; two of them (12.50%), for the promotion of communicative competence (oral and written), mentioning aspects such as the use of vocabulary; four (25.00%) emphasize the learning and application of the L1; and one

student (6.25%) the knowledge and application of the emoji. In addition to these ideas, students offer interesting strategies and the inclusion of the emoji in the daily methodology, such as visual support for teaching; the benefit in the development of interculturality and socio-cultural competence; substitutes for other activities; or in storytelling and representation.

Regarding the use of emoji in a foreign language (question 9), the sixteen informants (100.00%) also state that they can be applied to the teaching of L2. In this sense, fourteen of them (87.50%) agree on the learning of vocabulary; one on the development of intercultural competence; and another student on the facilitation of scaffolding in learning. Likewise, as in the L1, the students offer different reasons, strategies, and methods for the inclusion of the emoji, such as a motivation technique; to work on emotional education or personality development; the benefits for the development of written competence or as visual support; or to lower the stress filter due to the lack of linguistic competence.

## 5 Final considerations

Possible didactic applications of emoji for the development of written language competence in Spanish (L1) and English (L2) have been glimpsed in this study. Although Instagram is the platform chosen to document the comments of the different images, the possibilities of using the emoji in academic texts are recognized, which helps to associate a “high (formal) value” to “online writing” (DANESI, 2016, p. 97). Likewise, although emoji are not usually used in formal writing contexts or are not initially created to express something serious or even grave (DANESI, 2016), this work states the peculiarities of emoji as visual elements and “representative of the conceptual field” (HIGHFIELD; LEAVER, 2016; personal translation): emoji allow their users to condense large amounts of information into minimal visual units, represented in smileys; for example, 😊.

As for the didactic possibilities of the emoji for the development of written competence in academic texts in L1 and L2 -and concerning the emoji creators’ emoji of “[...] to make written communication between anyone, regardless of language background” (DANESI, 2016, p. 95)-, they could be used in the field of language teaching. The emoji can even be used for the development of “meta-literacy awareness” (DANESI, 2016, p. 97),

that is, the progressive construction of one's knowledge about language skills from the correct application of the emoji as conceptual elements. On the other hand, as regards the didactic possibilities, Prensky's (2010) position is corroborated with these words of Londoño (2018; personal translation): "instead of playing down the learning objectives, the rich social network life of our students can contribute to deeper learning".

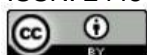
Also, the conceptual nature of emoji facilitates the treatment of topics in written language that could be initially complicated to handle (DANESI, 2016) by students, especially in L2, due to their formal character, as highlighted in the virtual forum. With a view to teaching at stages such as Primary Education, it should be remembered that the application of emoji does not imply an interruption of the syntax of the target language, both in L1 and L2 (DANESI, 2016), but that the text is reinforced using visual signs that are systematically interspersed (DANESI, 2016), replacing or enhancing types of words such as verbs, adjectives, adverbs or even complete expressions.

Based on the fact that emoji represent visual units that can be inserted in texts individually or in groups and that, at the same time, contain contextual information, they can be defined as "metaphorical pictures" (DANESI, 2016: 66). Therefore, they can be used not only as elements that substitute or accompany the text, regardless of the target language but also as promoters of activities aimed at increasing students' creativity based on their interpretation, which in turn will depend on cultural connotations. In summary, Table 8 incorporates the comparison between the objectives, general and specific, and the research hypotheses:

**Table 8 – Objectives and hypothesis of investigation**

(keep going)

<p>O.1. The emoji grammar conforms to the rules of syntax and semantics (DANESI, 2016) in L1 and L2. They can be used as resources for the development of written competence in academic texts, mainly when they act as meaning enhancers due to their conceptual nature, but not (or not so much) as text substitutes.</p>	<p>H.1. The transition from non-academic to academic texts is subject to writing conditions in the learning context. The inclusion of the emoji does not determine the academic or non-academic record of a text, but depends on the language of use, as well as on the format and writing standards, as observed in the Instagram comments.</p>
<p>O.2. The analysis of the use of emoji denotes similar behavioural traits for distribution, uses, and expressions, with minimal differences between languages. This implies an almost systematic application of emoji independently of the target language, which establishes the conceptual nature of emoji, being able to accompany texts in any natural language.</p>	<p>H.2. The behaviour of the emoji shows similarities between languages. According to Danesi (2016, p. 78), this is due to "[...] the interweaving of the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic dimensions of the emoji code allows users to engage in the cognitive flow of a text and thus either produce or comprehend its meaning".</p>



**Table 8** – Objectives and hypothesis of investigation

(conclusion)

<p>O2.1. In terms of syntax, emoji hardly replace text, especially in L2. This means that users only use them as such (text substitutes) when they expect the receiver to be able to fully understand the meaning conveyed. So, this resource has hardly any place in L2.</p>	<p>H.2.1. Emoji enhance the conceptual meaning of the text. However, their grammar implies more than that of a language to which visual symbols are attached. Instead, “[...] it has its own ‘syntactic’ or system for organizing the emoji to create coherent and meaningful sequences of combinations” (DANESI, 2016, p. 78).</p>
<p>O.2.2. The function of emoji is to enhance the meaning to give emotional connotations to the text, that is, emoji “[...] reinforce, expand, and annotate the meaning of a written communication” (DANESI, 2016, p. 15). In the scenario of confinement by the COVID-19, the emoji denoted, even more, its conceptual character, serving as elements that reinforced the written ideas, in many occasions of hope or sadness.</p>	<p>H.2.2. The use of the emoji is conceptual: “[...] their function is thus neither purely substitutive nor decorative [...]. They are meaning-enhancing devices that are amalgamated with alphabetic ones, turning modern-day informal writing into a unique kind of bimodal system” (DANESI, 2016, p. 15). Sometimes, it is easier for users to the emoji to represent emotions than written texts <i>per se</i>.</p>

**Source:** Own elaboration (2020).

After all these considerations, some limitations of the study should be pointed out. As noted, the very first emoji were developed in the late 1990s. In these twenty years, few studies have analyzed the emoji from a solid linguistic perspective, so one of the main limitations of this study is the limited bibliography included in scientific journals and newspapers on the subject. That is why the emphasis has been placed on research such as that of Danesi (2016) or that of Evans (2017).

Finally, after this first analysis in which the use of emoji as a resource for the development of written competence in formal academic contexts is glimpsed, future lines of research are proposed in which the types of texts used by students will be analysed, categorizing them into the four main categories of texts or textual sequences: expository, narrative, argumentative and descriptive. Also, the use of emoji is related to the linguistic and textual characteristics of these types of texts or textual sequences.

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