

Using Emoji to Improve Female Students' Coherence in Writing at Qassim University

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ABSTRACT

Writing is considered a very important learning tool for all content areas. There is no doubt that writing skill is essential for any kind of learning either at the school or the university level. Therefore, the present study attempted to explore the possibility of improving university students' one of writing sub-skills, known as coherence through emoji. Coherence in the students' writing was measured according to the students ability to a) use repetition to link ideas, sentences, and paragraphs, b) use transitional expressions to link ideas, sentences, and paragraphs, c) use pronouns to link sentences, d) use synonyms to link ideas and create variety, e) use parallel structures to link ideas, sentences, and paragraphs. The sample of this study was randomly selected from the Third Level female students joining the Department of English at one Saudi public university. The selected subjects were assigned randomly into control group and experimental group. After administrating the pretest for the two groups, the experimental group was given a six-week treatment of emoji meant for improving the writing sub-skill, while the control group was taught writing without using emoji. One week after the treatment, a posttest was administered to the two groups. Results revealed significant difference between the students' scores in writing in favor of using emoji to improve students' writing skills. Thus, the findings show the effectiveness of using emoji in improving students' coherence in writing. The results were used to draw some conclusions and to suggest some recommendations for teaching writing using emoji. The results also recommend further researches to be done on using emoji to improve other language skills and sub-skills.

INTRODUCTION

In an ever-changing world that is heavily impacted by new communication technologies and emerging media cultures, technological advances have demonstrated a dramatic shift in how individuals communicate. While face-to-face interaction once dominated the communication landscape, we now live in a time of an accelerating change. However, propelled by the ubiquity of portable electronic devices, modern interlocutors can share rapid and efficient computer-mediated messages (Adams, 2013). Nowadays, the world is heavily impacted by new communication technologies and emerging media cultures, and popular texting discourse is increasingly favoring unique visual resources during communication (Algharabali and Taqi, 2018). The rise of the internet gave birth to a method of communication we recognize emoticons, which then evolved to emojis presently.

The emojis actually have become the shortest version of expressing messages non-verbally. Sometimes people even judge the attitude of others to the kind of emojis they use. It has become a modern trend in communication (Suresh, 2018). These authors define emojis as pictographs used in text-based communication (Miller et al., 2016). The word 'emoji' comes from the Japanese language: 絵 (e ≅ picture) 文 (mo ≅ writing) 字 (ji ≅ character) (Davis and Edberg,

2016). It is a slightly more recent invention, but with the rise of social media, emoji have become a prevalent form of communication in social media. Emoji, which were initially were only present on the Internet, started to invade the offline world too and become an essential tool of communication (Bosch and Revilla, 2018). The fact the Oxford English Dictionary selected the emoji for "tears of joy" (😄) as its "Word of the Year" for 2015, shows how frequently it is used in communication (Fullwood et al., 2015).

Recent research also indicates that emotions have been gradually replaced by emoji (e.g., Aldunate & Gonzalez-Ibanez, 2016; Brody & Caldwell, 2017; Sampietro, 2019; Troiano & Nante, 2018). These studies emoji are the modern version of the concept of emotions. The increasing use of emojis and the fact that they can be strung together to create a sentence with real and full meaning raises the question of whether they could be used inside the classroom to teach a language. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted at the university level in Saudi Arabia with the aim of understanding the use of emojis among university learners in formal learning classes. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate whether using emojis in writing classes will improve students' writing skills, or it will do the opposite. Specifically, the study aims at

providing data-supported answers to the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a statistically significant difference in students' use of coherence in writing between those who were taught writing through emojis and those who were taught without emojis?
- 2) To what extent will the use of emojis improve students' coherence in writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A recent study conducted in 2017 with more than 85,000 Facebook users concluded that 90% of them included at least one emoji in their public feed (Oleszkiewicz, Karwowski, Pisanski, Sorokowski, Sobrado, and Sorokowska, 2017). Another study using naturalistic data showed that Twitter users who adopt emoji tend to decrease emoticons usage (Pavalanathan and Eisenstein, 2016). In fact, emojis are often confused and used interchangeably with emoticons (Alshenqeeti, 2016). However, according to Cambridge dictionary, Emoji is "a digital image that is added to a message in electronic communication in order to express a particular idea or feeling" while emoticon is "an image made up of symbols such as punctuation marks, used in text messages, emails, etc. to express a particular emotion" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>). Merriam Webster defines the word emoji as:

"Any of various small images, symbols, or icons used in text fields in electronic communication (as in text messages, e-mail, and social media) to express the emotional attitude of the writer, convey information succinctly, communicate a message playfully without using words, etc."

Whereas, emoticons as:

"A group of keyboard characters (such as:-)) that typically represents a facial expression or suggests an attitude or emotion and that is used especially in computerized communications (such as e-mail)" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>)

Emojis were first introduced by Shigetaka Kurita in Japan in (1999) to provide contextual cues and emotional context on a mobile internet platform. His emojis were created for a very specific purpose. i.e., ease of communication on a nascent mobile internet system developed by Japanese telecom giant NTT DoCoMo. The system offered emails, but they were restricted to 250 characters. Thus, emojis were a way to express more in a limited space (Skiba, 2016). The potential of emojis has grown and evolved and now includes face-based emojis, animals, food, faces and other pictures that can be used individually or together to create meaningful communicative strings (Alshenqeeti, 2016). According to latest studies on this research topic (e.g. Aldunate & Gonzalez-Ibanez, 2016; Brody & Caldwell, 2017; Sampietro, 2019; Troiano & Nante, 2018), emoji are not exclusive to facial expressions, but they are inclusive of concepts and ideas such as activities, feelings, animals, plants, celebration and even buildings.

Emojis are found not only in social media applications, such as social networks, but they are also represented on a myriad of products (e.g., clothing, books, toys & games, office supplies and music videos) and are even main characters

of a recent animation movie ("The emoji movie") (Prada, Rodrigues, Garrido, Lopes, Cavalheiro and Gaspar, 2018). Al Rashdi (2015) investigated the function of emojis in casual communication in the Omani culture and explores emojis as a venting tool in professional circles. His results demonstrated that emojis do not mainly serve as indicators of users' emotions only. In fact, emojis also serve many other communicative functions such as approval or disapproval of others' messages, responding to expressions of thanks and compliments, conversational openings and closings, indicating celebration and excitement, and indicating fulfillment of a requested task, contextualization cues, substitute for lexical items, and indexical signs. Al Rashdi study also examines the forms and functions of repetition of emojis, which was a ubiquitous phenomenon in the data. These forms were found to serve various functions such as indicating intensity of emotions, displaying enthusiasm and excitement, indicating insistence, showing solidarity, and adding emphasis or highlighting a certain part of an utterance.

However, young people rely on emoji because emojis are considered as a substitutive tool for non-verbal cues. Hence, the use of emojis is related to an enhanced capacity of expressing the real meaning or the emotional intention of the message (Kaye et al., 2016). Emojis with text is similar to gestures that appear with speech. In the past, research shows that our hands provide important information that often transcends and clarifies the message in speech. Emoji serve this function too (Cohn, 2018). (Alshenqeeti, 2016) mentions that

"spoken language, in any tongue is nearly always delivered with emotional or physical cues, whether this is voice tone, hand or eye gestures, and other visual elements. In a digital context, these are not present. Emojis close this gap in a creative and highly visual way and ensure the writers' thoughts and feelings are expressed in a concise and fun way."

In a recent study (Prada et al., 2018), the usage of emoji and emoticons was examined. The results reported that the participants used such emoji as opposed to emoticons more often. The study also revealed more positive attitudes toward emoji usage. All the ratings were higher among younger (vs. older) participants. Results also showed that women reported using emoji (but not emoticons) more often and expressed more positive attitudes toward their usage than men express (Prada et al., 2018). Results of the past research showed that the use of emoji is not the same in all context. i.e., the use of emojis increases in dialogic contexts (Kaye, Wall, & Malone, 2016). It also increases in socio-emotional contexts compared to task-oriented ones (Sampietro, 2016). Oriol J. Bosch and Melanie Revilla (2018) stated that Millennials use emojis mainly in dialogic contexts like instant-messaging apps and less in task-oriented communication contexts as e-mails. In a study conducted by Algharabali and Taqi (2018), the researcher investigated the use of evaluative emojis among college students in Kuwait. They found that the use of emojis by college students is highly important in the discussion of college-related topics. The researchers reported that emojis could be used as a safe vehicle to reflect criticism and negative comments in an au-

thority-free setting. Whether they are used individually or in clusters, Emojis carry a bundle of meaning.

Despite the encouraging and positive results on the use of emoji reported in previous research, there are still concerns arising from the use of emoji related to the negative aspect of emoji. In other words, the increasing use of emojis is ruining the English language because young people rely more and more on them to communicate (Turner, 2018). In certain quarters, emojis are an exciting evolution of the way we communicate; to others, they are linguistic Armageddon (Cohn, 2018). According to Wilden (2017), headlines from the media such as 'emoji will cause the death of English. The researcher keeps asking whether the use of emoji is killing the language and whether it is just a natural result of the popularity of emojis. This is not the first time in which such headlines appear in the media, and a quick search will reveal that they said the same about text messages and social media. Language teachers then can choose to go for or against the headlines. They can take a more positive approach, similar to the one taken recently by many teachers who are supporting the use of emojis to improve language skills like writing skills.

Many teachers believe that the written language has been the victim number one of the development of technology-supported communication using-mails, chat, social networks and other means of communication. In other words, many young people prefer the use of images and emoticons instead of written oriented. Therefore, their language has dangerously been affected or almost gradually neglected. Only a handful of young people today can write properly because of this. Teachers with the positive approach think that it is no use preventing students from using emojis as long as young learners are already using Internet slang words, abbreviations, chat acronyms, emoticons and now emojis excessively, but it is advisable to take advantage of the situation (Abdessalami, 2017). These teachers do not suggest using emojis as a replacement for language or even writing in communication among young language learners. At the end of the day, as they are language teachers, it is not teaching the meaning of emojis that is key but tapping into images that can help students generate and retain language. Language teachers use pictures in their course books to help them teach their students meaning, and they use other aids such flashcards in reinforcing and producing the language. The use of emoji to improve the learning process, however, is just simply another way to help students remember a word, produce a sentence or get them engaged in a piece of writing (Wilden, 2017). Teachers should encourage their students to correctly use emojis to enrich their written language. This goes beyond using emojis among students in talking about their feelings or writing a rebus story. Regarding this, Harmer (2017) pointed out that:

"Many students either think or say that they cannot or do not want to write. This may be because they lack confidence, think it is boring or believe they have 'nothing to say'. We need to engage them, from early levels, with activities which are easy and enjoyable to take part in, so that writing activates not only become a normal part of classroom life but also present opportunities for students to achieve almost instant success." pp 113

The language skills are often divided into sub-skills. The sub-skills are specific behaviors that language users do in order to be effective in each of the skills. In writing, coherence is a sub-skill. Coherence means the connection of ideas at the idea level and is achieved when sentences and ideas are connected and flow together smoothly, (Jones, 2011).

Coherence is achieved when sentences and ideas are connected and flow together smoothly. It allows the reader to move easily throughout the essay. Coherence, in writing, can be achieved using the following methods:

- a) Use Repetition to Link Ideas, Sentences, and Paragraphs
- b) Use Transitional Expressions to Link Ideas, Sentences, and Paragraphs
- c) Use Pronouns to Link Sentences
- d) Use Synonyms to Link Ideas and Create Variety
- e) Use Parallel Structures to Link Ideas, Sentences, and Paragraphs (Wiemelt, Slawson and Whitton, 2007)

Ahmed (2010) mentioned that number of research papers in the Arab world have spotlighted students' coherence problems in English writing. For example, Arab students' written texts revealed that repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices are major sources of incoherence and textual. Such challenging issues motivated us to focus our current study on how to improve Saudi Arabia university students' use of coherence in writing.

METHOD

The methodology of this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Participants

The participants in the study are the third level female students joining the Department of English in a Saudi public university during the academic year of 2018/2019. The sample of 46 students representing the population was selected randomly to participate in this study. Those students were assigned randomly into two groups: the experimental group (n=23) and the control group (n=23).

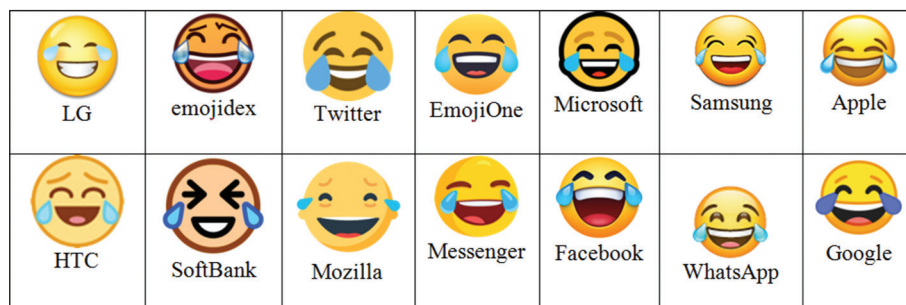
Instrument

This study is an experimental study and adopts a pretest and posttest design with one treatment group and a control group. Data were collected through two equivalent tests which were processed statistically using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to answer the questions of the study.

Procedure

To investigate the effect of the use of emoji in writing classes improved the EFL learners' coherence in writing, the following procedures were followed:

- a) Reviewing the relevant literature.
- b) Selecting appropriate Emojis to be used inside the class (with the experimental group) as a treatment.



AQ1 Figure 1. 'tears of joy' across some different platforms (emojipedia.org)

AQ1 Table 1. Mean of the two groups in the two tests

Test	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Control group	23	39.83	12.463	2.599
	Experimental group	23	39.96	9.791	2.042
Posttest	Control group	23	40.43	14.412	3.005
	Experimental group	23	44.83	10.870	2.266

Table 2. Mean of both control group and experimental group in the pretest

Test	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Pretest	Control group	39.83	12.463	(0.969)
	Experimental group	39.96	9.791	

- c) Designing and validating pretest and posttest.
- d) Selecting the sample and assigning groups.
- e) Conducting the pretest.
- f) Teaching the two groups by the researcher (for six weeks).
- g) Conducting the pretest.
- h) Scoring item test and analyzing, discussing and interpreting the results.
- i) Reports the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regardless of the effect of the treatment (use of emoji), the two groups demonstrated considerable growth on the posttest. This growth can be attributed to the relatively long period (six weeks) and the intervening instruction between the pretest and the posttest. Yet, this growth was not the same in the two groups. The following table present a comprehensive view of the results obtained by the two groups.

However, the sample was selected and assigned randomly to guarantee homogeneity; it was recommended to establish this statistically. For this reason, the mean of the two groups' performance in the pretest were compared to each other as shown in table 2. In the table, there is a slight difference in the mean of the two groups, but this difference is not significant since the value is (0.969). Therefore, the two groups can be said to be very similar in their writing skill (coherence) before the interventional sessions.

Since homogeneity of groups is ascertained in the pretest, posttest performance of the subjects in the two groups can be

compared to their performance in the pretest. Any difference found in the posttest can be safely attributed to the effect of the treatment. For this purpose, independent sample t-test was used. Regardless of group, the mean of both pretest and posttest display a noticeable difference.

And to know the group for which the higher increase happened the mean scores of both control and experimental groups are displayed in the following table

The results reveal an obvious difference in the mean scores of the Experimental group (44.83) and the Control group (40.43). Having a close look at the mean of the gains by the two groups, it can be seen that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group (significant value 0.000). Therefore, this difference can be safely attributed to the effect of the treatment (using emoji to improve students' writing skills).

Since the effectiveness of using emoji to improve students' writing skills was ascertained, it was possible to move to the second question. It was stated as: "To what extent will the use of emoji improve students' writing skills. "To answer this question, independent sample t-test is used again to compare the mean of the scores gained by the Experimental group in the pretest and posttest. In other words. The scores achieved by the Experimental group before and after the treatment.

It can be seen in table 4 that the mean value of the Experimental group in the posttest (44.83) is significantly greater than the mean of the same group pretest. The gain score (pre.-post.) is -4.87. This highly significance difference (significant value is 0.000) between the mean.

The results obtained in this study revealed significant difference between the students' scores in writing in favor of using emoji to improve students' writing skills. Thus, it can be said that the use of emoji increased the motivation of students and created a natural atmosphere for learning, and consequently led to successful process of developing their writing skills as reflected in the posttest. These findings prove that emoji could be used effectively to improving students' coherence in writing.

Table 3. Mean scores of the control and experimental groups in the posttest

Posttest	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
	Control group gains (0.6)	40.43	14.412	13.455	0.000
	Experimental group gains (4.87)	44.83	10.870	19.778	0.000

Table 4. Mean scores and Gains of the experimental group in the pretest and posttest

Experimental group	Test	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.	Gains (pre-post)
	Pre.	39.96	9.791	19.778	0.000	-4.87
	Post.	44.83	10.878			

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the argument over the possibility of using emoji to improve language learning, the present study attempted to investigate the applicability of using emoji in achieving this purpose.

To realize this aim, an experiment was carried out in the Department of English, College of Sciences and Arts in Onizah, Qassim University in the second semester of the academic year 2018/2019. After selecting appropriate emoji to be used inside the classroom, two tests of equivalent versions (pretest, posttest) were designed.

The number of the subjects involved in the experiment was 46 undergraduate EFL female learners selected and assigned into two groups randomly. The two groups (each consisting of 23 students) were referred to as Control group and Experimental group.

One week before the treatment, the subjects of the two groups were given the pretest. Later, the Experimental group was taught reading through emoji, and the Control group was taught writing without using emoji. The posttest was administered to the two groups one week after the treatment. Data obtained through these tests were coded and statistically analyzed using SPSS in order to arrive at reliable results and findings.

After collecting the data, it was found that the Experimental group scored better in the posttest. The results indicated that the measure did assess a significant difference between the results of the Control group and the Experimental group. The Experimental group did significantly better on the posttest than the pretest. In addition, it did significantly better on the posttest than the Control group.

The results reveal a pattern, which is consistent with the questions of this study. However, the results may not be generalized to other subskills, since the study did not cover all the different levels of writing. Therefore, further research need to be done to warrant such a generalization. In addition, further researches need to be done in the area of teaching language skills (reading and speaking) through emoji.

The results thus suggest that for improving writing and producing successful writer, emoji may be used successfully.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations are made based on the above findings.

1. Authentic materials like emoji should be used for teaching writing skills.
2. Since learners obviously benefit from using emoji, EFL teachers are encouraged to integrate these materials into their class without being afraid that these materials may affect the students' negatively.
3. It is advised to hold training programs for the teachers to enable them to teach language using emoji.
4. There is a need for further researches to be done on using emoji to improve the language skills and sub-skills.

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