

## Emoji in the World Language Classroom

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### Introduction

*“Let’s let kids from around the world connect with each other and learn from others from different cultures and backgrounds.”<sup>1</sup> – Jenna Schlistra*

For my unit, I plan to explore with my seventh grade World Language students the use and implementation of one of the fastest growing forms of communication in Technology--emoji. Students will investigate the use of emojis in the Spanish-speaking world. We will explore the shades of meaning of the most popular emoji. As a culminating activity, each student will be paired with an e-pal who is a native speaking Spanish student in another country. Students will communicate electronically with their e-pals over the course of at least four conversations sharing information about themselves in the target language while incorporating emojis appropriately to clarify meaning, effectively express emotion, and convey humor.

### Background

I teach at John Dickinson High School in Wilmington, Delaware in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme. The middle school is located within the high school building in a wing of its own and was created as an extension to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme for grades 11 and 12. The Diploma Programme was initiated at Dickinson five years prior to the inception of the Middle Years Programme (MYP). MYP was implemented three years ago to encourage more students to participate in the Diploma Programme. In its first year, MYP included grades six, seven, eight and this year will be expanding to include grades nine and ten. A continuous sixth through twelfth grade International Baccalaureate Programme will be established at Dickinson. Our Middle Years Programme will be growing in numbers this coming school year growing from about 200 students to the maximum of 300.

At Dickinson, students must apply to participate in MYP. To be eligible, students must be on grade level in both Reading and Math, must be motivated, and have a teacher recommendation. I currently teach Language Acquisition Spanish, years one and two, which is a requirement of the Middle Years Programme. We meet for forty-seven minutes every day.

## Rationale

Open-mindedness is one of the ten attributes included in the IB Learner Profile. *IB students have a deep understanding of various cultures and views, bringing an appreciation of new views to both their academic study and their involvement in local and wider communities. Their international mindedness complements the missions of the best tertiary institutions.*<sup>2</sup> Our school population is made up of Caucasian and African-American students and some of Asian descent. There are only three English Language Learners in the group. Our students typically have a shallow understanding of various cultures not only close to home, but also around the world. They need opportunities to immerse themselves culturally in order to appreciate the similarities in our human experiences that on the surface appear to be seemingly different. My plan is to use authentic Spanish texts and realia, including emojis, to present students with opportunities to immerse themselves in the Hispanic culture using authentic target language texts. Authentic texts are defined as “written by members of a language and culture group for members of the same language and culture group”.<sup>3</sup> It is my hope to incorporate emoji, often considered to be a universal language, into this unit so that students can have exposure to Hispanic culture through the personal experiences of native speakers as told in their native tongue. Authentic texts expose students to culture through the experiences of the author/speaker because the text the writer uses refer to common experience, expressing facts, ideas or events referring to certain knowledge about the world that others share. Text also reflects the communicator’s beliefs, attitudes, and point of view and those of her/his culture. “*Language expresses cultural reality.*”<sup>4</sup> Through this unit, my students will experience the Hispanic culture and relate it to their own. In addition, emojis can add a refreshing bit of fun to the mix in a World Language classroom. Students can relish in their momentary expertise in the classroom and the teacher can embrace what may seem a bit foreign.<sup>5</sup>

Welcoming emojis into the classroom is one way to use student experience to develop World Language skills. Rather than detract from learning goals, my students’ rich social media lives can contribute to deeper learning. By connecting to skills that my students already use with technology, maybe I will be able to make Spanish class seem more relevant to them.<sup>6</sup>

I am focused on three goals in the creation of this unit. First, I would like for my students gain a cultural appreciation and understanding not only of our American (North, Central, and South) neighbors, but also of their Hispanic classmates and community members. Incorporating emojis into target language communication allows the students to delve deeper into significance of each individual emoji.

Second, I would like for the students to be risk-takers in their approach to learning. Delving into text in the target language for some first and second year students of the language can seem quite daunting and almost impossible. Emojis can be a useful tool for

teaching beginners because they can represent many simple words and phrases. Fortunately, emojis can clarify meaning and they are the universal tension diffuser.<sup>7</sup> It is my hope that the students use emojis to explore the text in depth, spurring them on to make deeper cultural connections.

Third, I would like for students to communicate effectively in the target language using written and nonverbal communication skills in a variety of forms and contexts, and use multiple media and technologies and know how to judge their effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> Expressing one's emotions in the target language in writing for first and second year students can be challenging, especially early on. Using emojis is a good way of communicating complex emotions really quickly. Humor can differ from country to country and often times it gets lost in translation. Emojis are definitely useful to express humor in the target language.<sup>9</sup>

## **Unit Overview**

It is my goal to design a unit in which students will use emojis, to express their comprehension of authentic Spanish language text. Students will investigate the origin of emojis, how they have evolved, evaluate their own personal use of emojis, and explore the use of emojis in Spanish-speaking countries. They will then apply what they have learned about emoji use to demonstrate their comprehension of written text in the target language and their ability to effectively communicate informally in the target language. To conclude the unit, each student will communicate with an e-pal in the target language incorporating emoji appropriately to clarify meaning, effectively express emotion, and appreciate humor.

## **Objectives**

This unit will be based on two IB MYP Objectives, two Delaware World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, and one Common Core English Standard. I will focus on IB Language Acquisition Objective Criterion C: Comprehending Written Text requiring the student to understand information and engage with the text by supporting opinion and personal response with evidence from the text. I will also evaluate Criterion D: Communicating in Written Form which expects the student to organize and express thoughts, feelings, ideas, opinions and information in writing, write for specific purposes, and develop accuracy when writing in the target language. The Delaware World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages are Standard 1.3 Interpersonal Communication: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions; and Standard 2.1 Relating Cultural Practices to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. The Common Core English Standards are Standard CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L3.5C: Distinguish shades of meaning among related words that describe states of mind or degrees of

certainty; and Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.3.3.A: Choose words and phrases for effect.

## Concepts

### Visual Communication

*“What is crystal clear is that visual representation of feelings, ideas, and the world around us is deeply imbedded in how humans have and will continue to communicate.”*<sup>10</sup>

Visual communication first appeared around 40,000 years ago in the form of cave art. As civilizations evolved this type of communication was simplified years later into pictographs. A pictograph as defined by WordReference.com Dictionary of English is, “a single sign or symbol that is a small picture, as in a system of writing using such symbols for words.”<sup>11</sup> Ideographs were another form of visual communication used by ancient civilizations. An ideograph is a symbol that represents an idea.<sup>12</sup> These symbols continued to develop to better express what was important to the people of that time. This form of communication eventually evolved into formalized systems of writing in Egypt around 3200 BC and China in 1200 BC.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1990s, Japan introduced emoji. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English an emoji is, “A small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion.”<sup>14</sup> In Japanese *e* means picture and *moji* means character.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the emoji is to clarify and amplify the subtext of digital communication.<sup>16</sup> According to Dr. Albert Mehrabian’s 7-38-55 Rule of Elements of Personal Communication, 93% of communicative skills are negated when communicating digitally. Emoji restore social intimacy and emotions to every day communications.<sup>17</sup>

### Culture

Emoji usage can act as a cultural mirror. It can tell us about our society, ourselves, and what we like to talk about. Emoji use reinforces assumptions and stereotypes about a particular area; for example, French speakers use four times more hearts than any other country and Nordic countries use Santa emojis. Sunny regions record a very low usage of the sun emoji likely because it is sunny in those areas most of the time. Interestingly, Arabic speakers are four times more likely to include flower and plant emoji in their digital communication despite the fact that it is dry and arid in those countries.<sup>18</sup>

Within a culture emoji usage can spike due to the influence of a particular person; i.e., celebrity or popular figure. DJ Khaled, a famous American record producer, created an emoji trend with his use of the key emoji on Snapchat and Twitter to spread “key” life advice. Fans of Kanye West, an American rapper, singer, songwriter, use the goat emoji to

represent “greatest of all time.”<sup>19</sup> Many celebrities have created and are marketing their own emoji, like Kimoji by Kim Kardashian and GagaMoji by Lady Gaga.

## Language

*“What is cool about emoji is that they give us a renewed appreciation for this additional layer of tone of voice, of facial expressions, of gestures that we take for granted on top of literal words we say because we haven’t had a really good system for representing it, and once we get cute icons for representing them we start paying attention to them more.”<sup>20</sup>*  
– Gretchen McCulloch

In spoken language communication two modes exist, formal and informal. Formal speaking can include a lecture, a presentation or a speech. An example of informal speaking is a casual conversation. When it comes to written communication, we have books, magazines, and newspapers. We have had very few kinds of informal writing beyond postcards or notes written to family members, friends or acquaintances. However, texting, tweeting, and social media platforms have created an explosion in informal written language. Emoji are really useful for informal written language because they supply an additional layer of embodiment on top of the literal words.<sup>21</sup>

## Teaching Strategies

### Vocabulary

Just reading an ELA standard with the words “Distinguish shades of meaning...” is like a neon sign flashing “natural connection to visual art!”<sup>22</sup> I plan to use shades of color to connect the shades of meaning/emotions of individual emoji by using paint chips to illustrate the semantic gradients of their descriptors.

Semiotics is a study of how meaning is created and how that meaning is communicated through signs. We are able to communicate using color, as each one has its own meaning which can vary from one culture to another. Colors can be used to signify value, order, or emotions.<sup>23</sup> For the purpose of this curriculum unit, I am incorporating the semiotics of color to teach vocabulary in such a way as to not cause confusion and to ensure that we, the students and the teacher, all understand and are following the same system. For the purpose of this teaching strategy, I selected the following universal color meanings from the “Colours in Cultures” color wheel on the *Information is Beautiful* website; red will be used to express anger or passion, yellow to express happiness, blue to express melancholy or sadness, green to express envy or jealousy, orange to express geniality, pink to express health, black to express badness/evil, and white to express goodness/purity.<sup>24</sup>

Using semantic gradients, students examine the subtle differences between related words by arranging them in a continuum. The goals of using this strategy are to help

students develop their vocabulary, extend their knowledge of words, and encourage them to think about the relationships among similar words.<sup>25</sup> Understanding these relationships will help students become effective communicators in the target language. With an emoji selected by the teacher, students will place the emoji on the top shade of the paint strip with shades of the color universally associated with emotion expressed by the emoji. On the next shade of the strip, students will write a descriptor of the emoji, likely the most commonly used descriptor. Then students will use the remaining shades of color to create a list of semantically similar words arranging them in an order that illustrates an understanding of each word's meaning. I will encourage students to arrange the words in order of intensity of the emotion depicted by the emoji, from least to most to reflect the intensity of the color shades. Upon completion, students will discuss the rationale for placing their chosen descriptors in the specific order. I will encourage conversations about the subtle differences among the words.

### Critical Reading

The Delaware Department of Education - World Languages current focus is connecting proficiency and the Common Core State Standards for ELA with a focus on Reading and Writing. When students engage in critical reading they have a deeper and more complex engagement with a text. Critical reading is a process of analyzing, interpreting and, sometimes, evaluating. When students read critically, they use their critical thinking skills to question both the text and their reading of it.<sup>26</sup> Because students' apparent seamless navigation of emoji usage is similar to our practice of critical reading skills in class, emoji offer an excellent opportunity for the transference of digital skills to written context.<sup>27</sup>

Using activities similar to those suggested by Marissa King in her article "Using Emojis to Teach Critical Reading Skills" on the *Edutopia* website, students will first be asked to analyze the same emoji being used in different sources. A single emoji can have multiple meanings based on context, just like words. The goal is to have students use context clues to determine the writer's intent. Photo, text, and emoji together need to be considered to figure out the message the writer is conveying. Context is key to understanding emojis, just as it is to decoding vocabulary. Building upon this, students will create reference guidelines for the new emoji user. Students will list the various meanings for each emoji (emojis can be determined by the teacher or selected by the students), include examples, and offer explanations on determining the intended meaning. In the end, students will create a set of directions for emoji comprehension with the goal in mind that a novice should be able to apply these directions to a new set of emoji. Students will check their work by applying the directions they have created to a new emoji set. This will provide them with the opportunity to readjust their work.

## Informal Written Communication

The purpose of informal written communication is to share information in a casual way within a social group that includes family members, friends, or colleagues. Informal written communication can include an email to a friend about your vacation, a text about where to meet, or a social media post about your day. Because informal written communication has no principle structure or rules, it can be passed on quickly from one person to another spreading rapidly and thus running the risk of the distortion of facts or communication of misinformation.<sup>28</sup> In order to prevent this from happening I will help students to focus on the message they intend to deliver by providing the following guidelines for effective informal written communication. First, students should be encouraged to state their purpose clearly. If their message requires a response, students should be reminded to let that be known. Second, instruct the students to use simple language and reiterate that using the appropriate emoji can enhance meaning along with clarity. Third, emphasize that when it comes to length, less is more. Lastly, encourage students to use an active voice. This will strengthen their message allowing their sentences to flow better and their message to be easily understood.

### **Activity 1: What Your Emoji Says About You**

The first activity, adapted from an activity created by Cambridge internet blogger Lindsay Clanfield, is designed as a hook to pique student interest and to access students' prior knowledge of emojis. To begin, I will ask the students, using the target language, which emoji they think is the most used. They may call out their answers providing their descriptions in English. I will ask to share their explanation, in English, of why they think the emoji they have chosen as the most popular is just that. I will then share with the class what is my most commonly used emoji (at this moment it happens to be the basketball hoop with the basketball). Next, I will ask them, again using the target language, what emoji they think that they use the most. As before, they can provide their answers in English. I will instruct the students to take out their devices, be it cell phones, tablets, or computers, and access their favorite messaging application. They should be able to find the emoji keyboard within that application. Within the device's operating system (Android or IOS), students should be able to locate the option that provides them with either their most frequently used emojis or their most recently used emojis. Once the students have located that option, I will direct them to check that the emoji they mentioned as their most used is there among their most recently used or frequently used emojis. If it is, they will turn to a shoulder partner and share with that partner their screen displaying the emoji. If the emoji they chose as their most used is not displayed as such, then they will choose another emoji that appears as one of their most frequently or most recently used ones and then share that image with a shoulder partner. After sharing the image, each student, using the target language, will explain to her/his partner why s/he uses that particular emoji more often than others.<sup>29</sup> I will circulate around the classroom assisting students with needed vocabulary from the target language. In addition, students may use online

dictionaries such as *Word Reference* to help them with target language vocabulary. After shoulder partners have shared their emojis and explanations with one another, I will follow up by asking for some volunteers to share with the class, in the target language, their partner's most used emoji and the reason given for why that certain emoji is the most used. Addressing the entire class, I will ask them in the target language what the commonly used emoji and the reason for its usage indicates about the user, encouraging students to reply in the target language and providing vocabulary assistance when needed. This activity should provide a proper segue into the next activity.

## **Activity 2: Shades of Meaning**

This activity is designed to encourage students to think about the relationships between emojis and their degrees of intensity of meaning. To begin the activity, students will explore the usage of emojis in the Spanish-speaking world using information from graphs and maps containing information about emoji trends such as the top emoji in text messages, most popular emoji on Twitter, and emoji usage broken down by country. This information can be found on internet sites like *Swiftkey* and *Socialfly*. Upon completion of their research, students will share their findings and I will facilitate a whole class discussion that will determine, based from students' research, the top fifteen emojis. After determining the top fifteen or so emojis I will ask the students some of the following questions: Based on your knowledge of Hispanic culture, why do you think this particular emoji is the most popular? What does the most used emoji in any given Spanish-speaking country indicate about its people? Why do you think this specific emoji is used to express that emotion? Next, working as shoulder partners, each pair of students will be randomly assigned one of the fifteen emojis. Using the infographic "Colour in Cultures" from the website *Information is Beautiful*, students will select the color that most universally relates to the descriptors of the emoji; for example, yellow for happiness, or blue for sadness. Then after selecting a paint chip strip with four shades of the chosen color, each student pair will illustrate their emoji at the top of the paint chip strip. On the first shade of the strip, students will write a descriptor of the emoji, likely the most commonly used descriptor. For a smiley face emoji, the first descriptor in Spanish might be the word *contento*, which in English means content. Then students will use the remaining shades of color to create a list of semantically similar words arranging them in an order that illustrates an understanding of each word's meaning. As they arrange the words, students can discuss and justify their ordering. I will encourage students to arrange the words in order of intensity of the emotion depicted by the emoji, from least to most to reflect the intensity of the color shades. Upon completion, students will discuss the rationale for placing their chosen descriptors in the specific order. I will encourage conversations about the subtle differences among the words. To differentiate this activity, students can be given the paint chip strip with the first descriptor determined, and the remaining descriptors on sticky notes. Students then have to place the descriptors in order on the strip.



In Figure 1 I have provided two examples of this activity using the “happy face” and the “sad face” emojis. Because universally the color yellow is associated with happiness and the color blue is associated with sadness, I chose the paint chip strips with the shades of those colors.<sup>30</sup> The vocabulary in the target language, Spanish, is written on the paint chips in order of word intensity to match the intensity of the color shades. For the “happy face” emoji the first paint chip displays the word Spanish *contento*, which means content in English. The next word in the semantic gradient is *feliz*, meaning happy. The third word is *alegre*, that means joyous. The final word choice is *jubiloso*, which means exuberant. For the “sad face” emoji, the first Spanish term is *decepcionado*, meaning disappointed. The second word choice is *triste*, sad. Third, I have selected *abatido*, which means glum. Lastly is the Spanish word *deprimido*, meaning depressed. As mentioned previously, students should be encouraged to discuss and justify their ordering during the process of creating their own semantic gradients and they should be prompted to provide their rationale for placing the descriptors in the specific order noting the subtle differences between the words.

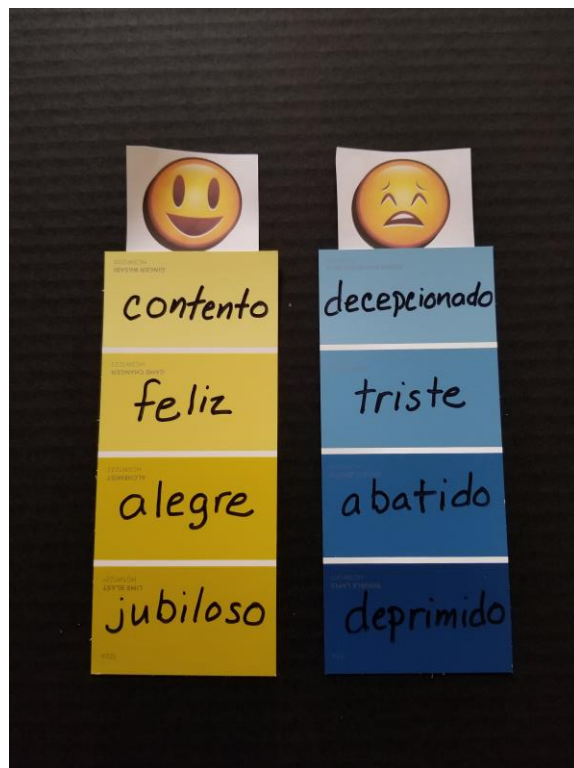


Figure 1

### **Activity 3: Meaning in Context**

The goal of this activity is to have students use context clues to determine the writer's intent. To introduce this activity I will use several authentic target language text messages and tweets taken from various sources like *Twiccionario* from the *Zachary Jones* website,<sup>31</sup> the article "Exploring the Punctuating Effect of Emoji in Spanish WhatsApp Chats,"<sup>32</sup> and social media posts from celebrities in the Spanish speaking world. We will read through the messages together as a class. Students will be randomly divided into groups of three or four. I will direct each group to focus on the messages containing a specific emoji and to analyze how it is being used differently in each of the messages. I will instruct them to consider both emojis and text in order to ascertain the particular meaning of the emoji in each message; for example, determine whether the silent face emoji communicates speechlessness at the news of a horrific event or the lack of power in the face of authority.<sup>33</sup> At this point in the activity, the semantic gradients created by the students in Activity 1 can be a useful tool in aiding to determine the emoji meaning. The class will reconvene as a whole and each group will share its determinations with the class. My end goal is for the students to realize that context is key to understanding emojis.

Building upon the previous group work, students will work in pairs to create reference guidelines for the new emoji user. Students will list the various meanings in the target language for each emoji (Emojis can be determined by the teacher or selected by the students), include examples in the target language, and offer explanations on determining the intended meaning. In the end, students will create a set of directions for emoji comprehension with the goal in mind that a novice should be able to apply these directions to a new set of emojis. Students will check their work by applying the directions they have created to a new emoji set determined by the teacher. This will provide them with the opportunity to readjust their work.

### **Activity 4: Authentic Communication**

To conclude the unit, each student will communicate electronically with an assigned e-pal over the course of at least four conversations. In these conversations they will share information about themselves in the target language while incorporating emoji appropriately to clarify meaning, effectively express emotion, and convey humor. This culminating activity will require each student to employ the strategies learned from the previous two activities, semantic gradients and context clues, to communicate informally with a native Spanish-speaking student using emojis and written text in the target language. Students will be assigned their e-pals through an internet pen pal service such as *ePals*<sup>34</sup> or *Students of the World*.<sup>35</sup> In collaboration with the teacher from the Spanish

speaking school, we will decide on the range of topics that can be included in student communication such as favorite pastimes, food, music, films, and places to visit. We will determine the optimum time for sending/receiving correspondence over the course of a four-week period. Time will be set aside each week in class for e-pal correspondence. In an effort to facilitate student communication both teachers will work together to pre-match students based on known their known interests. I will provide students with a packet containing the following information about this project; a letter addressed to both the student and their parent(s) and a detailed explanation of the project requirements along with the rubric. Throughout the project process students will be required to keep a project diary with screenshots of correspondence between themselves and their e-pals. The diary will be used as evidence of the student's ability to effectively communicate informally with a native Spanish speaker using emoji and written text in the target language. Each student will be assessed on his/her use of the target language, the incorporation of emoji in correspondence to appropriately clarify meaning, effectively express emotion, and successfully convey humor. In addition, students will be assessed on their comprehension of the informal communication from their e-pals based on their written responses. Students will have the opportunity to present to the class what they have chosen as the best sample of communication with their e-pal.

### **Appendix A: Standards**

This unit will implement two Delaware World Readiness Standard for Learning Languages and a Common Core English Standard. The Delaware World Readiness Standard for Learning Languages, Standard 1.3, states, "Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions." This standard is addressed in the culminating activity of the unit, communicating electronically with an e-pal in the target language while incorporating emoji. The Delaware World Readiness Standard for Learning Languages, Standard 2.1, states, "Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied." This standard is addressed in the creation of reference guidelines for emoji usage with the target language. The Common Core English Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L3.5C, states, "Distinguish shades of meaning among related words that describe states of mind or degrees of certainty." This standard is addressed in the use of semantic gradients to examine the subtle differences between related words. The Common Core English Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L3.3A, states, "Choose words and phrases for effect." This standard is addressed in the creation of reference guidelines for emoji usage in the target language and the class discussions leading up to the creation of that document in addition to the culminating activity of the unit, communicating electronically with an e-pal in the target language while incorporating emoji.

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## Endnotes

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