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TES talks to... Vyvyan Evans

Linguistics shows that we can recognise more than 10,000 facial expressions, so the idea that teachers can convey more with emojis than just words is far from outlandish, the language expert tells Jennifer Richardson

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Professor Vyvyan Evans thinks that you should be taking emojis seriously.

No, seriously, he does.

The language and communication expert made headlines in May when he suggested that some carefully composed texts featuring emojis could improve your relationship (you know what that aubergine is for). He's probably going to make more headlines now by suggesting that they could be useful for teachers - and teaching - too.

Until 2016, Evans was a professor of linguistics at Bangor University, a position he held after teaching at the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex. He's currently busy writing books and journal papers, as well as editing the Language and Cognition journal. But it is in his latest book, *The Emoji Code: How smiley faces, love hearts and thumbs up are changing the way we communicate*, that his theories about emojis have arisen.

Certainly, emojis are now a major fixture of our culture. Emoji news is no longer the preserve of the specialist tech press - it's a big, national, general-interest story. Twitter's 69 new releases and Google's scrapping of its "blob" emoji made headlines from the Guardian to the Daily Mail. *The Emoji Movie*, which is due out in the UK in August, even features Sir Patrick Stewart as the voice of the "poop" icon.

Evans reveals that 6 billion emojis are sent across the globe every day and he has little patience for the "uninformed" notion that they might make us more stupid, lazy or poor communicators - or that the emoji is, as he puts it, "the death knell for language as we know it". This argument reached fever pitch when the Oxford English Dictionary named the "face with tears of joy" emoji as word of the year in 2015.

"The naysayers, the doom-mongers, the self-appointed grammar police in the popular press and so on argue - without any evidence - that things like emoji are basically the equivalent of an adolescent grunt," he scoffs, "and if you want to fail miserably in the communication stakes, then use the smilies, otherwise stick to the language of Shakespeare. [But] people that pooh-pooh it and turn their nose up and think it's puerile and childish don't understand how communication works."

Just in case that lack of understanding applies to any of us, here's a quick recap from Evans.

The first part of communication is language: the words themselves. The second is para-language: the sound, including intonation and pitch. The third is what Evans refers to as kinesics: motion-based information including facial expressions and body posture.

The first is by far the weakest link, he says: "Key aspects of meaning don't derive from language; in fact, language is the poor relation [to] non-verbal cues in terms of the communication stakes."

To illustrate, Evans points out that "if the pitch is opposite to the words in terms of what it's conveying, then we tend to believe the pitch contour rather than the words. This is the way we can convey that we're being ironic, for example: 'I'm so excited I have an exam coming up'."

Kinesics, though, are "the real clincher in terms of meaning". Humans can produce and recognise more than 10,000 facial expressions. This basic fact of communication is key to understanding the role and potential of emojis, in life as well as in education, says Evans. As we spend more and more time online - he cites statistics suggesting the average British adult spends 22 to 24 hours a week online, rising to 27 hours for those aged under 25 - we lose the opportunity to employ the vital non-language aspects of communication.

"Digital communication is actually replacing aspects of face-to-face interaction in professional, social and educational contexts," says Evans. "And, as it turns out, emojis are actually making us more effective communicators in the digital communicative space because what they're doing is filling in something that's actually missing. This is where emojis come into their own. They're providing a form of tone of voice or a kinesic cue, the non-verbal cues that tell us how the message should be interpreted."

Emojis are 'like punctuation'

Teachers have a duty to grasp the concept and its potential, believes Evans: "We have to say to teachers: look, you have a responsibility - as a human being and a communicator and someone presumably interested in education - to understand how opportunities to more effectively communicate are being revolutionised by virtue of digital technology."

Rare is the teacher who doesn't believe in and impress upon students the importance of accurate use of commas and full stops, and Evans argues emojis "are simply a continuation of punctuation".

"They are a way of allowing us to manage ...our emotional expression; that's what the exclamation mark was invented to do in the 15th century," he says.

There are three obvious ways in which emojis could support education, believes Evans. The first is in supporting children's emotional expression; the second in supporting the development of their linguistic skills; and the third in making subjects more accessible.

Children are not linguistically competent until their pre-teens or early teens, says Evans, so using emojis to help them express their emotions can be particularly beneficial for primary years. The reason comes back to humans' mastery of facial expressions and the fact that the majority of emoji use (70 per cent globally) relates to emotion.

"We're very good at reading emotional cues from visual tells and young people are equally adept at this but they may not be as adept at using language, so... from a teacher's perspective, something like an emoji is very powerful," explains Evans.

Given this argument, should you be making use of the myriad articles, resources and lists available online that offer to help you incorporate emojis into your lessons?

"Yes, there are clear arguments, particularly at the primary level, why teachers should incorporate these new kinds of developments in terms of digital communication for educational purposes," he says. "There is evidence that visual forms of representation and systems of communication can actually aid the development of regular language. So there's an argument for teachers using this in terms of the digital aspects of a lesson plan or a classroom context that would not only help children express themselves more effectively, and perhaps learn more effectively, but might also enhance their linguistic abilities."

The third use of emojis in education - making subjects more accessible - might be particularly useful at secondary level, suggests Evans. He chuckles at the controversy caused by Penguin's 2015 launch of the OMG Shakespeare range of abridged texts. "I think there's actually value in this in terms of turning people on to things," he argues. "Because this connects with what kids are doing anyway, this makes certain topics more accessible."

In the education of children with specific needs, such as those who don't speak English as a first language, or those with behavioural or developmental problems, "there are clear opportunities" for all three of these roles for emojis to be employed, adds Evans. But what if you're not feeling confident in your emoji fluency?

"You don't need to become an expert in emoji, you just need to know the basic ones," argues Evans.

He recommends emojipedia.org as a "handy little guide" for teachers to look them up as they go. And for those who are resistant, Evans has a warning: "This is more than just a passing fad; this is mainstream."

He hopes that the future will see software and app developers focusing on resources and tools that would help and support teachers to incorporate emojis into the classroom.

"Teachers could be at the vanguard of trying these sorts of things out and seeing how they could be used," he suggests. "It has to be taken very seriously, the multimodal support that emoji speaks to and facilitates. Don't write it off because then you're missing a trick as an educator."

Jennifer Richardson is a journalist and lecturer at Kingston University.

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