

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE: WHY EMOJIS SHOULDN'T REPLACE WORDS

by:

Marvin B. Hernandez

Teacher II, Lamao National High School

In today's digital world, communication extends far beyond essays, letters, or face-to-face conversations. Students now interact through chats, posts, and comments—often filled with emojis, GIFs, and stickers. While these symbols bring emotion and playfulness to online exchanges, they should never take the place of words, especially in academic and professional settings where clarity, accuracy, and structure remain essential.

The rise of emojis has undeniably transformed the way young people communicate. For many students, typing a smiley face or a heart is faster and feels more natural than constructing a full sentence. In the Philippine setting, this habit is particularly common. Dela Cruz and Santiago (2023) found that Filipino junior high school learners often used emojis as "shortcuts" for emotions like agreement, humor, or confusion. This practice fosters creativity and relatability, but it also reduces opportunities for students to practice vocabulary, grammar, and sentence construction. Over time, this reliance on symbols rather than words can limit their confidence and precision in writing.

The concern is not unique to the Philippines. International studies also reveal the limitations of emoji-centered communication. Bai et al. (2019), in a systematic review of emoji research, concluded that while emojis help soften tone and clarify emotions in digital conversations, they fall short when it comes to expressing complex arguments or nuanced reasoning. Similarly, Pavalanathan and Eisenstein (2021) observed that students who heavily relied on emojis in online learning platforms tended to write shorter, less detailed responses. These responses often lacked

the explanation and elaboration needed for full comprehension. Such findings remind educators that while emojis add warmth to communication, words remain the primary vehicle for deep thought and clear expression.

This does not mean emojis should be banned. Instead, the challenge for teachers is to help students understand the right balance. In the classroom, one effective approach is to incorporate digital messaging tasks that encourage students to “translate” their informal, emoji-filled messages into complete sentences. For instance, a student might write in chat: “I ❤️ this story 🎉✨.” The teacher can then guide them to reframe it as: “I love this story because it is emotional and beautifully written.” This exercise shows students that while emojis can highlight emotion, words give structure and meaning.

Another key teaching point is awareness of register and audience. Students must be able to distinguish between informal and formal communication. Emojis are acceptable in casual conversations with friends, but not in academic essays, scholarship applications, or professional correspondence. By practicing how to switch registers, learners develop communicative competence, which is essential not only for school but also for the workplace. Role-playing activities work well here: one group can draft an informal group chat, while another rewrites the same content into a school memo. These tasks allow students to see firsthand how tone and word choice must change depending on the context.

Teachers also play a role in framing emojis as a complement to language rather than a replacement. Instead of discouraging their use entirely, educators can emphasize that effective communication requires both creativity and clarity. Encouraging reflective exercises—such as asking students to explain why they chose certain emojis and how they might express the same idea in words—can deepen their awareness of language choices.

Ultimately, the goal is not to strip communication of personality but to ensure that students develop the discipline of expressing themselves clearly through words. Emojis can enrich conversations by adding emotion and personality, but they cannot replace the depth, precision, and nuance of language. By guiding students to use both wisely, teachers help them become flexible communicators—capable of thriving in digital spaces while also excelling in academic and professional contexts.

References:

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