# The Rise of the Emoji : An Informal Survey of Literacy, Historical and Contemporary, with a view toward new opportunities for the ESL classroom

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## —An Informal Survey of Literacy, Historical and Contemporary, with a view toward new opportunities for the ESL classroom—

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## 1. Literacy past and present

New technologies are radically changing the ways we communicate, and even the character of our communication itself. How has this happened, and what are some possible implications?

To begin at something like the beginning, the defining feature of humanity is, if not our handy opposable thumbs, the use of language. When exactly (or roughly) did our species begin speaking? Estimates range from 2.5 million years ago, coinciding with the first stone tools, and as late as 50,000 years ago. (And this wide range makes it a "hot" topic for debate and research, and a great topic for in-class discussion— was there a "first" word?) This exclusively vocal period is termed "pre-literate." (Although there is the possibly separate consideration of sign language— did waving and pointing precede speech? One wonders. Grammar is, strictly speaking, anatomical.)

Written language, on the other hand, and more to the point at hand, is slightly easier to date. The first "true writing," (as opposed to "proto-writing," using ideographic or mnemonic symbols) appeared in Sumer (Mesopotamia) and Egypt by 3100 B.C., China by 1200 B.C., and Mesoamerica by 300 B.C. Those Sumerians also invented arithmetic and multiplication, and notations— written languages— for those.

It is worth considering that the first "tally sticks" (notched sticks or inscribed stones) for counting are around 40,000 years old, and the earliest cave paintings are from around the same time, both constituting sophisticated symbolic communication systems, if not "true writing" systems. It is also interesting to consider that numbers came first: business first, even in the Palaeolithic era.

So much for the blurry archaeological record: whatever the exact timing, beginning about 5,000 years ago ideographs or graphemes came to be used phonetically, and this led to alphabets. (We can trace our "modern" Roman alphabet to Greek, ultimately from Phoenician, coinciding with Sumerian, or, possibly Canaanite— an interesting historical question, and and engaging and useful topic for language students. The ideographic original meaning of letters alone can make for a good lesson.)

This ability to save and transmit speech was the beginning of an information revolution, and we might well say, the beginning of "History." This was enhanced by the technologies of paper production and, especially printing, which was the beginning of mass media, which, arguably, is the defining feature of modern or 21st-century culture.

The equally revolutionary technologies of sound transmission, recording, and then wireless broadcast bear mention, as well. Photographs, motion pictures, and video have also played a part in shaping the character and content of our discourse. (And, in terms of the history of record-keeping, it is worth looking at the sideline of musical notation, a much later phenomenon, which might be looked at as a hybrid of mathematics and language.)

The latest revolution has been the personal computer, widely available

from about 1975, and, especially, in this century, the mobile phone. These devices and technologies have dramatically changed the literacy and literary landscape. In just the past decade, newspapers and magazines and "hard-copy" books have all but disappeared. They are relegated to the status of "legacy" media, to borrow a computer term. (Youtube, Google, Facebook— these corporate monickers have themselves become verbs.)

Consider, too, the disappearance of stamps, the decline in printed and minted money, physical photographs, records, tapes, and even "first-generation" digital media like floppy discs and compact discs… (As another aside, there is some irony in the fact that printing technology— 3-D— appears poised to take over manufacturing, even as traditional printing has precipitously declined.) Broadcast media, radio and television, have lost much of their "market share." The video game industry has outpaced motion pictures in sales. The Mario Brothers have beaten Mickey Mouse.

Concerns have been voiced (and texted and broadcast and even printed) that people have become less social due to the PC and mobile phone, that we spend too much time on the devices and not enough interacting personally, (although it would seem that communication is communication, and that perhaps we have become more "social" due to mobile phones and essentially full-time "connectedness," for better and worse.)

The current generation has never lived without mobile phones, and they have been termed "digital natives," in opposition to "digital immigrants;" neat, if somehow demographically-charged terms. (Cf. "netizens"— denizens of the digital domain.)

There is concern that people do not read as much, that we simply watch videos and clips on our phones, but, there again, reading and writing have not disappeared, although they have in some ways changed. We have, in large part, stopped spelling, instead depending on "spell checking" programs. (This is even more notable in Japan and China, with the notoriously difficult kanji.) We no longer memorise telephone numbers.

These changes have been termed "New Literacy" or "new literacy," among others— it is a fresh topic and its terminology is somewhat fluid.

There are two main schools of thought regarding these posited, variously described literacies. One view of these changes takes a basically psycholinguistic approach, and posits that they require new skills and patterns, and may even be changing our brain structure, while the other is more sociolinguistic, and sees more continuity than change, simply old styles in a new form.

One of the most notable changes, and certainly the most colorful, has been the emergence, and widespread use, of new ideograms, not just independently but incorporated into “regular” text. These are “emoji,” a typically Japanese compound. (“E” means picture and “moji" means symbol, letter, or character.)

These first appeared in Japan in 1999, created by Shigetaka Kurita for the NTT DoCoMo telephone internet platform, and were quickly adopted or adapted or absconded by other companies.

An emoji was the Oxford Dictionary’s “Word of the Year” for 2015. It was the "Face With Tears of Joy,” a.k.a. “Laughing Emoji” or “LOL Emoji.” (We are also living in the Age of Acronyms. “A.O.A.,” to coin a non-phrase. Not enough time for full words or sentences, or a sign of creeping militarisation? Both, et al., certainly.)

In any event, the popular press (touching that we still term it such) has accepted the phenomenon whole-heartedly.

The earlier “emoticon,” is a portmanteau combining “emote” and “icon” which first appeared in digital form in 1982, created by Scott Fahlman of Carnegie Mellon University.

These may be seen as connected to printers’ “dingbats,” i.e. asterisks and pointing fingers, stars and Gutenberg knows what else. We might even look at them in light of the history of punctuation itself, which was not much used until the invention of moveable type in the mid-15th century.

One might, as well, draw a connection between these latest ideograms and the still-ubiquitous “Smiley Face,” created by Harvey Ball in 1963.

Also relevant historically is the much-copied “I Love NY” logo, with a heart representing “Love,” designed by Milton Glaser for a 1977 (and

ongoing) promotional campaign for New York City. (And that heart has been accepted for use on vehicular license plates in the United States— perhaps the surest, and purest, stamp of officialdom in that automotive nation.)

Emoji might also be related to the advertising phenomena of bumper stickers and posters and, especially, the literary space of screen-printed t-shirts (which name came from the Roman alphabet, available in upper- and lower-case.)

Also notable are the "international prohibition sign" (the red circle/ backslash,) first published as a "standard" in 1984, but surely earlier— a very good research question.

Another ubiquitous graphic whose origins and history are worth delving into is the "thumb up" (or "thumb down") symbol— interesting both as a symbol and a gesture and a popular phrase.

These new symbols have become standard, and have, arguably, achieved the status of traditional letters and even words and phrases. They are useful, and allow for new shades of meaning, and more nuanced responses. They are something new and different, so they still have novelty value, useful in itself for certain effects or expression.

They can also be seen as, simply, "fun," and we should never discount the value of good, old-fashioned fun, most particularly in a foreign language classroom.

## 2. CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

The telephone in the classroom has gone from being a minor annoyance, a beeping or buzzing distraction, to an absolute boon, from a problem to a tool.

The following are a few exercises I have tried over the past few years:

Whether for singing or simply reading/reciting and discussion/ vocabulary building, songs are a great resource, no more so than when they are chosen by students. Having lyrics instantly available makes it easy.

The “classics” of poetry and literature, the “canon” of English (and World) Literature, are freely available online, which makes them not just convenient but more accessible intellectually. I have found it very useful to allow students to “graze” through a selection of different works from a given period, then let them choose which to focus on. This is particularly useful for generating topics for essays.

Questions about historical events and biographies are quite useful, as are maps and geography— where was Sumeria? Exactly how do I get from here to the nearest Italian restaurant? Sometimes a simple game like “who can find Emily Dickinson’s birthday first?” can be good in a class.

Top 10, top 100, top (or bottom) whatever, anything lists have been invaluable to me for lessons— popular music, sporting events, television, movies: what’s big, what’s happening today? Discussing, or simply mentioning, really current events helps to keep things fresh— not all students are all that interested in the “deep” history of alphabets or primatology or even new pictographs, truth be told.

It is very good to have students become comfortable looking things up in English. In a perfect situation, they retrieve different sources, with slightly different wording and information, which is good for discussion, and especially useful when teaching writing in the “Journalistic style” and the sacred “lead sentence.”

Of course, focused research is great, but I have found that “random” incidental questions— whether directly or incidentally related to a topic, are the best, in terms of what students enjoy and remember.

When teaching a language, try everything because you never know what will stick. That’s how it seems to me, and the approach that has worked best in my classes.

To conclude, or, rather, to expand on these topics, the following are a few related topics and issues of possible interest to language teachers and students, not to mention wider social issues related to new technologies:

We might wonder about the future of the written word, and the future of language studies, as well.

We are at the very beginning of AI, "artificial intelligence," and vocal commands or requests and responses are standard. Will the future be strictly vocal, because it's easier?

As for foreign language study specifically, what will be the future of translation programs and their application? We already have nearly-simultaneous translation, and even though they are not perfect, they will be better and better.

There may be some pleasure and perhaps profit in envisioning dystopian or utopian futures. In the future, will people will become too lazy to even talk? It is not inconceivable that we will simply trigger speakers by thinking. One can even imagine a system that bypasses sound entirely—the technology is close…

We can target and erase specific memories, and presumably it is only a matter of time before we can implant them, if we have not already…

There are, even now, algorithms that seem to read our minds, and perhaps, before long, write them. Facial recognition technology and routine mass surveillance have turned privacy into an impossibility. We might also consider the possibilities and perils of robots and drones.

There is, as well, the whole other world of "virtual reality," which might suggest a future where "real" reality will be a privilege.

Important issues and useful topics, even if verging on science fiction and fantasy. (It is also useful in class, at times, to speak in such terms, to be "extreme" or melodramatic, in order to spur discussion.)

As for the future of language and writing itself, we are, at heart, social creatures, and we like to hear the sound of ourselves and others, and we like the echoes or shadows, the shapes that record and reflect our smiley or frowny human experience.