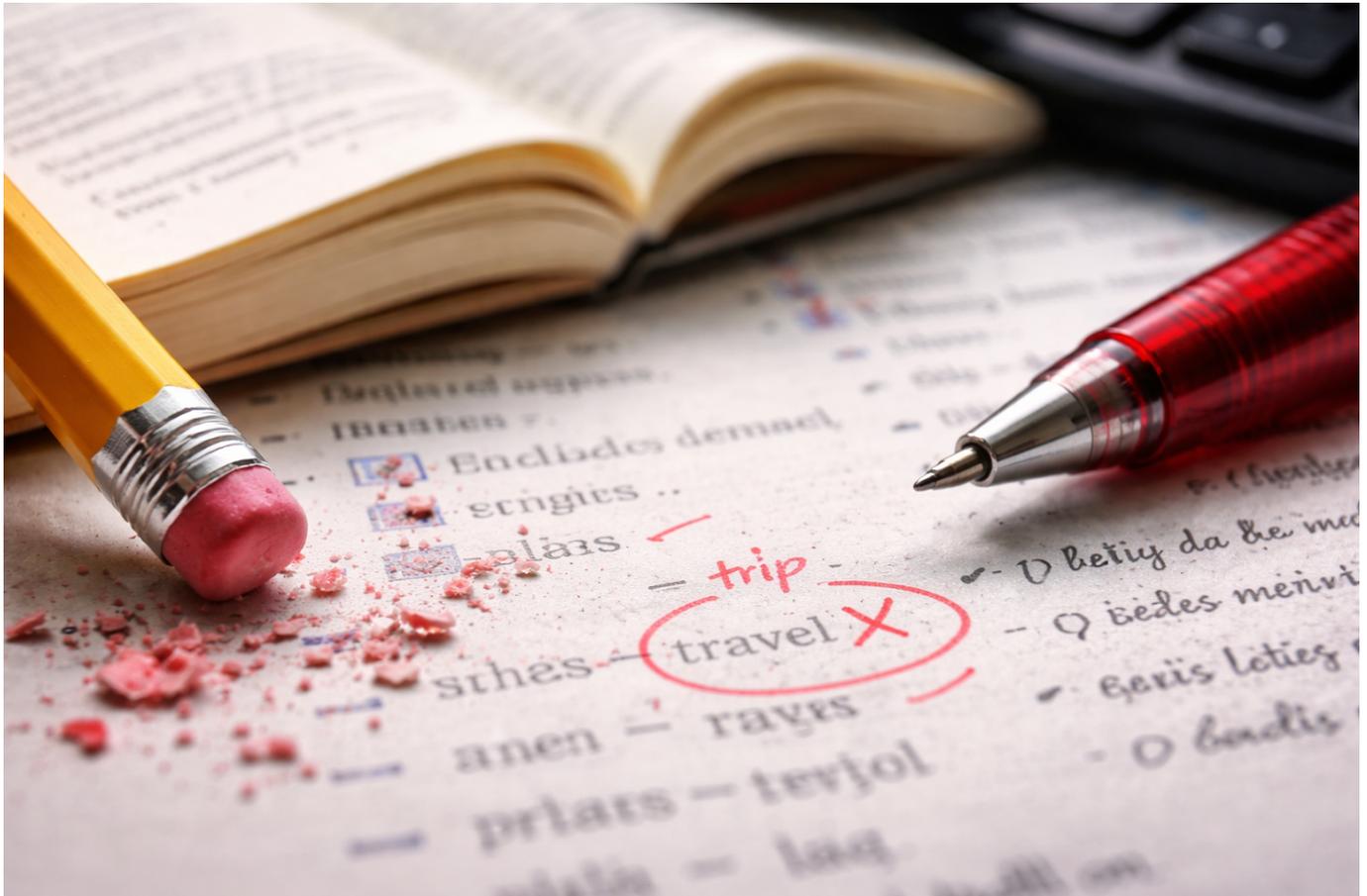# Turning errors into learning: What English Tests reveal in Engineering Education for Spanish-Speaking students

Por Beatriz Rodríguez Cuadrado, Óscar Santos Sopena

The famous quote "I stopped erasing until I realized that making mistakes is part of learning" **captures an essential truth**. Often, we consider mistakes as something to hide or fix as quickly as possible, but in reality, mistakes drive the learning process.

Applying this idea of learning from mistakes is essential in foreign language learning. When studying a language, it is natural to make errors, whether in grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, etc. For this reason, we analyzed errors not as failures, but as support **mechanisms in the learning process**. By systematically examining these mistakes, we gain deeper insight into the specific challenges learners face, enabling teachers to design more effective, targeted interventions that foster their students' academic and professional growth.

For native Spanish speakers, many errors in English arise from unconsciously applying rules and structures from their first language—a phenomenon known as "language transfer". In the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition, the concept of language transfer (also known as linguistic transfer or interference) has been widely studied. Several researchers have analyzed how the mother tongue can influence the learning of a new language, both positively and negatively. Among the main experts in this area are **Odlin** (1989) and **Selinker & Gass** (2011), whose research has greatly contributed to a better understanding of the mechanisms and effects of language transfer in educational contexts. These studies have shown that transfer can manifest at different levels: lexical, morphosyntactic, phonological, and pragmatic, and that its impact varies depending on the typological distance between the two languages involved, as well as the individual characteristics of the learners.

To illustrate this point in engineering academic context, when a native Spanish-speaking industrial engineering student encounters technical terms such as production, efficiency, quality, or risk, the near equivalence to their Spanish counterparts ("producción", "eficiencia", "calidad", "riesgo") offer a clear example of **positive language transfer**: prior knowledge in the first language accelerates comprehension and boosts confidence. However, this apparent overlap can also mask subtle yet important differences in usage, collocation, and connotation, for instance, "production line" versus "línea de producción", or the distinct way English organizes compound phrases like "quality assurance" and "risk assessment". Recognizing that similarity does not guarantee complete interchangeability encourages learners to verify context, register, and conventional industry phrasing, turning language transfer from a potential source of complacency into a strategic advantage for mastering English in their professional field.

TOEIC errors among native Spanish-speaking engineering students

English has become an essential prerequisite for scholarships, international placements, and career advancement. Consequently, academic institutions, including the students of the **Universidad Politécnica de Madrid**, incorporate the specific requirement of reaching a B2 level to qualify for enrollment in a mandatory subsequent course (English for Professional and Academic Purposes).

An analysis of recent mock data based on **the Reading part** of the **TOEIC test indicates** that the most frequent errors made by native Spanish-speaking engineering students arise from language transfer, that is, the unconscious application of first-language rules to English. Error classification highlights the most frequent mistake detected in the mock exams completed by the study sample. Below, we present several illustrative examples of the results extracted from the mock exams.

1. Lexical Transfer

To start with, in Spanish, the single term "viaje" covers a broad range of travel situations. English, by contrast, distinguishes among "trip" (a short or routine displacement), "journey" (a longer or more transformative experience), and "expedition" (travel for exploration or research). When learners map "viaje" indiscriminately onto trip, they overlook these contextual distinctions and select lexemes that do not correspond to the intended meaning, leading to incorrect responses on the TOEIC.

2. Semantic Categories

Spanish spatial vocabulary illustrates a second type of transfer. Words such as "ubicación" and "localización" may denote either a general area or a precise point. In contrast, English separates these notions: location refers to a broader setting, whereas position specifies an exact place or even a hierarchical rank. Failure to recognize this differentiation results in vague or inaccurate lexical choices.

3. Collocational and Pragmatic Transfer

Pragmatic transfer often produces combinations that, while acceptable in Spanish, sound unnatural in English. Phrases like "big preference" or "favorable preference" are direct calques of "gran preferencia" and "preferencia favorable"; idiomatic English prefers "strong preference." Adverbs such as "tentatively" and "carefully" present further difficulties because their discourse functions do not map neatly onto Spanish equivalents.

Systematic error analysis confirms that language transfer, rather than insufficient effort, underlies **many TOEIC difficulties for Spanish-speaking students** in an academic context. Effective instruction should therefore:

- Use errors diagnostically to identify specific lexical domains where transfer occurs.
- Contrast Spanish and English terms explicitly, highlighting micro-differences in meaning and register important for technical communication.
- Incorporate authentic corpora, so that students internalize high-frequency collocations (e.g., quality assurance, risk assessment, etc.).
- Teach pragmatic conventions appropriate to professional discourse, enabling learners to select adverbs and modifiers that align with English norms.

Conclusions

Results confirm that embracing mistakes as indispensable factors for growth allows both learners and teachers to transform

error analysis into a deliberately constructive tool. Our review shows that the **most frequent TOEIC pitfalls of native Spanish-speaking engineering** Students' errors are due to language transfer: they instinctively project Spanish lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic patterns onto English. While this transfer can speed up comprehension when cognates truly align, it may involve subtle collocational, register-dependent, or discourse-level differences that the TOEIC is designed to test. Consequently, effective instruction must go beyond "right or wrong" corrections and instead illuminate the grey zones where Spanish and English only partially overlap—e.g., trip vs journey, location vs position, or compound terms like quality assurance. By explicitly contrasting these micro-distinctions, **modeling authentic professional language**, and encouraging students to treat every misstep as diagnostic feedback, educators can convert transfer from a hidden obstacle into a strategic advantage.

Beatriz Rodríguez Cuadrado

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

Más artículos del autor

Óscar Santos Sopena

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

Más artículos del autor