

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TESTS: RESULTS AMONG ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN A SPANISH-SPEAKING CONTEXT

Beatriz Rodríguez Cuadrado

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos de Madrid

Òscar Santos-Sopena

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid



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Linguistic challenges in English proficiency tests: results among engineering students in a Spanish-speaking context

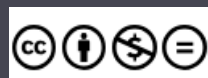
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Context analysis: Developing effective communication & language skills in higher education

- The TOEIC exam highlights the link between ESL education and effective communication. The exam measures the ability to understand written and spoken English through a series of multiple-choice questions.
- Universidad Politécnica de Madrid requires B2-level English proficiency for engineers to support career growth and international communication, offering TOEIC and other certified tests as accreditation pathways.



Context analysis: Developing effective communication & language skills in Higher Education

Strong communication skills and organized exam preparation are key to achieving both academic and professional goals (Tănașcu et al., 2020; García Laborda & Fernández Álvarez, 2021; Fernández Álvarez et al., 2022).

Spanish learners often face challenges with English vocabulary, grammar, and prepositions, highlighting the need for targeted teaching strategies. (Bocanegra, 2007; Carrió Pastor & Martín Marchante, 2016; Robisco Martín, 2009)

Which theories explain language learning errors?

- Error Analysis (EA):

Emerged as a response to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), examining learner errors to understand interlanguage development (MacDonald, 2016; Odlin, 1989; Corder, 1967).

- Errors are considered as diagnostic tools (Corder, 1967).

Learning occurs best in supportive, natural environments (Corder, 1967).

- Cross linguistic Influence (CLI):

Focus on how L1 structures impact L2 learning—positively (facilitation) or negatively (interference) (Jarvis, 2025; Gass & Selinker, 1983).

Study Overview: Research object, questions, and objective

We focus on
analyzing errors in
Second Language
Acquisition (SLA)
within academic
contexts.

- What are the most common error patterns observed in TOEIC Reading section scores?
- How do factors such as negative transfer affect the correct answer rate and discrimination level in the TOEIC Reading section?

OBJECTIVE: to identify error patterns in mock TOEIC Reading scores.

Methodology

Research focus

- Escuela Técnica Superior de Ingeniería y Diseño Industrial (Universidad Politécnica de Madrid).
- “Nivelación de inglés” (TOEIC Preparation).
- Part 5: “Incomplete Sentences” in the Reading Mock test.
- 49 responses (Mock test 1) and 41 responses (Mock test 2) obtained from Spanish-speaking students

Error Analysis Steps:

1. Identifying common student errors.
2. Categorizing errors at semantic, grammatical and pragmatic level.
3. Isolating errors caused by language transfer.

Results: Evidence of language transfer in Spanish-speaking learners

Error type	Example and explanation	Errors/failure rate
Grammar/Syntax	Confusion between “manager” and “managerial” due to incorrect selection of word forms like verb, noun, adjective, etc.	Error [8] (72%)
Grammar/ Syntax	Misuse after the expression “look forward to” learners fail to use a gerund (“receiving”) as required in English.	Error [9] (92%)
Grammar/Syntax	Learners failed to choose the correct verb form of “increase” (e.g., <i>increase</i> , <i>increases</i> , <i>increased</i> , <i>increasing</i>), especially third-person singular.	Error [10] (51%)

Results: Evidence of language transfer in Spanish-speaking learners

Error type	Example and explanation	Errors/failure rate
Pragmatic aspects	Learners failed to choose contextually appropriate adjectives (e.g., “favorable” vs. “strong”) before “preference.”	Error [11] (51%)
Grammar/Syntax	Incorrect preposition choice due to flexible L1 prepositional system.	Error [14] (75%)
Pragmatic aspects	Learners misselect adverbs due to confusion about precision and usage context (e.g., “inaccurately,” “coincidentally”).	Error [15] (78%)
Pragmatics aspects	Misunderstanding idiomatic adjectives like “heated” due to interpreting them literally.	Error [16] (83%)

Conclusions

Identifying recurring mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic elements highlights where language teaching can be more effective.

Students' first language affects their word use, grammar, and communication strategies. This should be considered in test preparation and teaching.

Standardized tests like TOEIC may not reflect diverse learner backgrounds. There's a need to adapt exam preparation to student profiles, especially regarding native language influence.

Categorizing mistakes helps tailor teaching to address specific learner challenges and better support language development.

Larger studies focusing on first-language influence are necessary to refine language instruction for Spanish-speaking learners.

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