

COMMON ERRORS MADE BY SPANISH GRADUATE STUDENTS TO BE AVOIDED AT B1 ENGLISH ORAL EXAMS

Raquel Sánchez Ruiz e Isabel López Cirugeda

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

Abstract

The European Higher Education Area requires graduate students to reach B1 level under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to obtain any university degree. This forces them to take official English exams, both written and oral, which presents difficulties for Spaniards, as many of them claim not to have taken any oral exam before. It is also challenging for teachers, who must combine the acquisition of communicative results, perceived as more demanding, with the traditional *use of English* aspects and provide a more creative and pragmatic use for all of them.

Considering the above, we have compiled a list of common pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical errors made by Spaniards to be avoided at B1 oral exams, based on teachers' notes from the three official B1 oral examination sessions at the university in the academic year 2013-2014. It aims to detect errors, mistakes and weaknesses so as to guide the teaching-learning process in future B1 intensive programmes.

Keywords: pronunciation errors, grammatical errors, B1 oral exams, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Resumen

El Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior requiere a los alumnos universitarios acreditar un nivel B1 o de usuario independiente según el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas para obtener cualquier grado universitario, lo cual implica la realización de exámenes oficiales. Esto supone un reto tanto para los estudiantes españoles, no acostumbrados a los exámenes orales, como para los profesores, que han de combinar la adquisición de resultados comunicativos, considerados más difíciles, con los aspectos gramaticales, más tradicionales, así como ofrecer un enfoque más pragmático y creativo.

A continuación ofrecemos una lista de errores de pronunciación, vocabulario y gramaticales registrados en los exámenes orales de las tres convocatorias oficiales de B1 del curso académico universitario 2013-2014. El documento pretende detectar errores, confusiones y áreas de mejora para servir de guía en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje en futuros cursos intensivos de este nivel.

Palabras clave: errores de pronunciación, errores gramaticales, exámenes orales de B1, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

1. Introduction

Internationalisation has become a priority at every stage of the educational system in Spain. The new LOMCE –Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education– (Jefatura del Estado 2013: 97864) provides three reference points to transform the education system in this country: Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the modernisation of vocational training and the *promotion of plurilingualism*. Mastering a second –and even a third– language is considered a priority within education as a result of globalization. Thus, the European Union promotes plurilingualism as a goal towards the European project, where students mastering a foreign language –including both oral and reading comprehension and oral and written expression– have more opportunities to get a job and achieve professional goals; thence the addition of a second foreign language to the Spanish curriculum (Jefatura del Estado 2013: 97865). Moreover, the teaching-learning process of a foreign language, where –as the education regulations state–

oral comprehension and expression are prioritised, must be in that language, and Spanish or any other co-official language in Spain could just be used as support in Primary and Secondary Education or Bachillerato –Spanish Baccalaureate– (Jefatura del Estado 2013: 97871, 97876, 97880).

The Regional Order 07/02/2005 implemented the European Sections Programme in Castilla-La Mancha and was later modified by the Order 23/04/2007, Order 13/03/2008, Law 7/2010 and Order 23/10/2013. Former European Sections are now called Bilingual Sections. Within this programme, a foreign language and non-linguistic subjects are taught through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) [Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha 2010: 86405]. Later, this importance given to languages was translated into the Royal Decree 7/2014, of 22nd January 2014, which establishes plurilingualism in non-university studies in Castilla-La Mancha [2014/897]. The main purpose of this document is to ensure students learn one or several foreign languages –especially those spoken in the European Union– as they are a necessary tool for the personal and professional development of any citizen in a pluralistic society, since languages are a basic feature of cultural identity and constitute a fundamental value of community cohesion (Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deportes 2014: 1657). This is put into practice through the Plurilingualism Promotion Plan, which is divided into three programmes: a) Language Initiation Programme, b) Language Development Programme and c) Language Excellence Programme.

Apart from the national and regional curricula, the European Union has implemented a new programme, the EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport for 2014-2020 (Erasmus+), whose aim is to boost skills and employability as well as modernising and supporting transnational partnerships among Education, Training and Youth work.

All this has also produced a deep impact on the adaptation to the European Higher Education Area, which established the requirement of achieving B1 level either to obtain an Academic Degree at the University or to access to Master's Degrees (Consejo de Gobierno de la UCLM 2013). This forces university students to take official English exams, both written and oral, which present several difficulties for them especially due to their lack of practice in oral exams.

2. Methodology

This paper offers a qualitative study aimed to improve the results of examinations. It is based on a list of common pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical errors made by Spanish graduate students to be avoided at B1 oral exams. This list was compiled with the teachers' notes and completed with a second listening of the student recordings from the three examination sessions of B1 official exams in 2013-2014 at the university. These notes were based on a rubric containing the criteria which will be specified in Table 1. Moreover, oral exams were recorded both for later revisions and readjustments of marks. Regarding the population studied, when students take this exam, they are studying either a Degree or a Master's Degree in fields that range from Arts and Humanities, to Science, Health Science, Social and Legal Sciences, Engineering and Architecture. They are usually aged from eighteen to twenty-one or twenty-two years old if they are enrolled in a Degree and from twenty-one to twenty-four in the case of a Master's Degree. However, these exams can also be done by external candidates, such as some non-English teachers, both from within and outside university, and administrative staff.

Examination sessions, which are held three times a year, are composed of a written paper and an oral part. On the one hand, in the written exam there are three different sections: listening, composed of two comprehension activities; reading, which consists of two comprehension activities; and writing, which includes use of English, that is, a cloze text, rephrasing and two compositions. On the other hand, the oral exam is done in pairs and has three parts: in the first one, the interview, ice-breaking questions are asked and students have to talk for about two minutes (monologue or speaking) individually; in the second one, the individual task, each candidate has to describe two different pictures and make guesses about them for about four minutes (monologue or speaking) individually; in the third one, the joint task, both candidates have to discuss on one proposed topic for about six minutes (dialogue or oral interaction) in pairs. On the whole, oral exams last for about ten minutes per pair and are done by two teachers with the aim of providing objectivity.

In these exams, students have to prove that they are *independent users in B1* or have achieved the *threshold level* according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Language Policy Division, Council of Europe 2001: 24), which means that they must be able to

understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.; [...] deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken; [...] produce simple connected texts on topics which are familiar or of personal interest; [...] and describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Consequently, in these exams, learners must comply with the qualitative aspects of spoken language taken from the CEFR for this level (Language Policy Division, Council of Europe 2001: 86, 87, 110, 114, 117, 129) explained in Table 1. In this table, the assessment criteria –which might be condensed in pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar, and interaction– are correlated to the already-mentioned three parts of the examinations.

Assessment criteria	Descriptors	Section
<i>Taking the floor (turntaking)</i>	-Intervene in discussions on day-to-day topics -Initiate, maintain and close face-to-face conversations	Part 3
<i>Co-operating</i>	-Exploit a basic repertoire of language and strategies -Invite others into discussions -Summarise points reached in discussions -Confirm mutual understanding and keep the development of ideas	Part 3
<i>General linguistic range</i> <i>Vocabulary range and Control</i>	-Describe unpredictable situations -Explain the main points in ideas or problems with reasonable precision -Express thoughts on abstract or cultural topics -Get by, with sufficient vocabulary, with some hesitation and circumlocutions, on familiar topics	Part 1 Part 2 Part 3
<i>Grammatical accuracy</i>	-Communicate with accuracy in familiar contexts -Accurate repertoire of frequently used routines and patterns	Part 1 Part 2 Part 3
<i>Asking for clarification</i>		Part 1 Part 3
<i>Phonological control</i>	-Intelligible pronunciation even if a foreign language accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur	Part 1 Part 2 Part 3
<i>Spoken fluency</i>	-Express with ease despite some problems with formulation resulting in pauses -Keep going without help and comprehensibly	Part 1 Part 2 Part 3

Table 1. Assessment rubric based on the qualitative aspects of spoken language of the CEFR

Moreover, students must pass both the written paper and the oral exam –which constitute 50% of the final mark each– to obtain the certification; so even though oral communication prevails, grammar is a key point both in the final mark and during their training. Despite this and the fact that the CEFR states that, at B1 level, students have to communicate with a reasonable degree of accuracy, grammatical errors persist. Thus, in the following section we explain the most common weaknesses regarding pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as well as giving the right option and some tips to avoid these weaknesses.

It must also be noted that in the studied academic course, 204 students took the written exam, 84 students passed the written exam and took the oral exam and 32 students passed the oral exam, which means that approximately 15.69% passed both exams. They can both prepare the final exam on their own or attend intensive programmes which get them ready for the official examination. Bearing that in mind, our aim is to improve the planning of future B1 intensive programmes, so this compilation will be disseminated at the beginning of this type of course and will help students to detect their own errors, mistakes and weaknesses so as to successfully pass this type of official exam. This list might also be taken into account by those students who choose private academies, private tutoring or simply self-study to prepare for B1 exams.

3. Analysis

In this section, errors are classified according to two parameters: first, according to the assessment criteria (pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar, and interaction) of the oral exam established by the university and teachers; and second, according to the assessment criteria and descriptors set by the CEFR. As mentioned above, all the examples provided in this paper were taken from the teachers' notes and transcripts of the oral exam.

3.1. Pronunciation

The *phonological control* mentioned by the CEFR implies that students' pronunciation has to be clearly intelligible even if their foreign language accent might be evident on particular occasions and infrequent mispronunciations occur. Pronunciation includes both segmental and suprasegmental phonemes. Segmental phonemes are vowels, consonants, diphthongs, triphthongs, semivowels and semiconsonants, whereas suprasegmental phonemes are rhythm, stress and intonation (Alcaraz and Moody 1999: 20).

Without going into detail, students must be aware that not only do they have to pronounce and choose the appropriate vowel, consonant, etc. but also consider rhythm, stress and intonation. Suprasegmental phonemes are difficult for Spaniards, especially stress and intonation, as they do not coincide with Spanish. Students should note that the stress in similar words does not have to be the same in both languages. Common stress mispronunciations occur in words like *interesting* or *comfortable*, since in Spanish the stress would be on the third syllable while in English is on the first syllable. Regarding intonation, English distinguishes between low rise and high rise intonation patterns (Hirst 1998: 63). However, “the intonation system of the Spanish sentence is mainly characterised by the different patterns and distribution of stressed syllables of the sentence”; thus, it is a syllabic language or a ‘trailer-timed language’ (Alcoba and Murillo 1998: 156, 163). Therefore, to imitate English pronunciation, students' pitch must move up and down. It is important to make students realise that incorrect intonation can result in misunderstandings, speakers' loss of interest or even rudeness or offence.

What can students do to improve their pronunciation of suprasegmental phonemes? First of all, they have to check the pronunciation of new words in a dictionary; focusing both on segmental phonemes and stress. It does not matter if they do not know or cannot read phonetic symbols as online dictionaries offer the opportunity to listen to the word. Learning new words implies learning their spelling as well as their pronunciation separately and at the same time; otherwise the learner cannot use the word correctly. Moreover, it is recommendable for students to learn weak and strong forms and which parts of speech are stressed and which not. Listening improves speaking and oral interaction as it helps to fix the pronunciation of words and recognising them. Thus, a very good way to practise the first two skills simultaneously is recording one's own voice –exaggerating intonation and stress, or any other pronunciation aspect– and listening to it afterwards to check precision, accuracy and detect any error to be sorted out or avoided in the future.

On the other hand, it is easier to pronounce segmental phonemes appropriately as long as students check their pronunciation in a dictionary and fix them in their minds. It must be noted that sometimes connected speech and other features of speech change the pronunciation of specific words –thence the difference between phonetics and phonology (Clark, Yallop and Fletcher 2007)–, but at least it would be advisable for students to know the general rules. Some basic and common words, usually mispronounced at the B1 oral exams analysed, are classified into different groups and explained below. When some words fit several categories, they were just written down in one single column to avoid overlapping and confusion due to excessive information. They are either very frequent words to talk about familiar topics at this communicative stage or their pronunciation hampers understanding to the extent that they contradict the CEFR descriptors on phonological control as there would be constant mispronunciation and, on the whole, pronunciation would be unclear.

It must be noted that “European Spanish speakers, in particular, find English pronunciation harder than speakers of most other European languages” mainly because of the differences between the Spanish and English vowel systems and sentence stress (Coe 2001: 90-91). For this same author, some common features of the pronunciation typical of Spanish speakers of English are:

- Difficulty in recognising and using English vowels.
- Strong devoicing of final voiced consonants.
- Even sentence rhythm, without the typical prominence of English, making understanding difficult for English listeners.
- Narrower range of pitch (in European speakers), producing a bored effect (Coe 2001: 91).

One other aspect that students often seem not to realise is English *silent letters*. These are graphemes that, despite being contained in the spelling of words, are not pronounced for several reasons, such as having kept the original spelling of borrowed words; having kept the old spelling of some words; representing sounds for which there are no letters in English by creating new combinations; or to distinguish words that sound similar, among others (Peters 2012: 2-3). Some of the most common mispronounced words in the mentioned official examinations which contain silent letters are illustrated in Table 2¹:

¹ After each word, the right phonetic transcription is provided for each category in the standard set of Unicode phonetic symbols for English; that is, for Received Pronunciation or similar accents.

Word (W)	Pronunciation (P)	W	P	W	P	W	P
answer	/ˈɑːnsə/	could	/kʊd/ or /kəd/	know	/nəʊ/	who	/huː/
biscuit	/ˈbɪskɪt/	friend	/frend/	suit	/suːt/	whole	/həʊl/
bomb	/bɒm/	fruit	/fruːt/	talk	/tɔːk/	write	/raɪt/
build	/bɪld/	half	/hɑːf/	walk	/wɔːk/	wrong	/rɒŋ/
castle	/ˈkɑːsl/	juice	/dʒuːs/	Wednesday	/ˈwenzdeɪ/	would	/wɔd/

Table 2. Correct pronunciation of words including silent letters

As Lizdas (2010: 10) states, “Spanish is a phonological language, often called a constant and regular language”; that is why Spaniards tend to read as they write. This is also why this author also affirms that Spanish is usually called a “clear” or “transparent” language, because 98% of the graphemics is phonemic. (...) English, on the other hand, is called an “opaque” language, because one letter can have many sounds”. This might be the reason why Spanish students equate English pronunciation with Spanish pronunciation, which results in reading or uttering words as they are written. Table 3 shows some of the most common words which are pronounced as they are written:

Word (W)	Pronunciation (P)	W	P	W	P
also	/ˈɔːlsəʊ/	eye	/aɪ/	option	/ˈɒpʃn/
ball	/bɔːl/	favourite	/ˈfeɪvərɪt/	orange	/ˈɒrɪndʒ/
because	/bɪˈkɒz/ /bɪˈkəz/	fireman	/ˈfaɪəmən/	parent	/ˈpeərənt/
breakfast	/ˈbrekfəst/	first	/fɜːst/	picture	/ˈpɪktʃə/
boat	/bəʊt/	fountain	/ˈfaʊntən/	pineapple	/ˈpaɪnæpl/
bus	/bʌs/	Friday	/ˈfraɪdeɪ/	really	/ˈriːəli/ /ˈriːli/
buy	/baɪ/	future	/ˈfjuːtʃə/	resource	/ˈriːsɔːs/ /ˈriːzɔːs/
call	/kɔːl/	hair	/heə/	sailing	/ˈseɪlɪŋ/
came	/keɪm/	idea	/aɪˈdɪə/	saw	/sɔː/
Chinese	/ˌtʃaɪˈniːz/	improve	/ɪmˈpruːv/	seemed ²	/siːmd/
church	/tʃɜːtʃ/	July	/dʒuːˈlaɪ/	series	/ˈsɪəriːz/
cold	/kəʊld/	library	/ˈlaɪbrəri/	shoes	/ʃuːz/
come	/kʌm/	live	/lɪv/	skirt	/skɜːt/
country	/ˈkʌntri/	luxurious	/lʌgˈʒʊəriəs/	thought	/θɔːt/
course	/kɔːs/	management	/ˈmænɪdʒmənt/	tired	/ˈtaɪəd/
cousin	/ˈkʌzn/	minute	/ˈmɪnɪt/	titled	/ˈtaɪtld/
crisis	/ˈkraɪsɪs/	Monday	/ˈmʌndeɪ/	treat	/triːt/
culture	/ˈkʌltʃə/	money	/ˈmʌni/	Tuesday	/ˈtjuːzdeɪ/
cupcakes	/ˈkʌpkɛɪk/	month	/mʌnθ/	Thursday	/ˈθɜːzdeɪ/
dangerous	/ˈdeɪndʒərəs/	mountain	/ˈmaʊntən/	unemployed	/ˌʌnɪmˈplɔɪd/
die	/daɪ/	nature	/ˈneɪtʃə/	vegetable	/ˈvedʒtəbl/
done	/dʌn/	nose	/nəʊz/	village	/ˈvɪlɪdʒ/
example	/ɪgˈzɑːmpl/	nurse	/nɜːs/	work	/wɜːk/

Table 3. Correct pronunciation of words usually pronounced as they are written

² This usually happens with regular past or the addition of the –(e)d morpheme in general.

Another similar problem to the previous one is trying to pronounce English sounds as they would be in Spanish, especially when they are quite similar. The typical ones are the /h/ usually pronounced as the Spanish /χ/, especially at the beginning of words (e.g. have), and /s/ at the beginning of words usually pronounced as /es/ due to the lack of its existence in Spanish (e.g. special). Sometimes particular mispronunciations “originate” new words by adding letters that exist in the Spanish word but not in the English one; for instance, *nervous* /'nɜ:vəs/ becomes #*nervious* and, consequently, is mispronounced as /'nɜ:vɪʊs/ or /'nervɪʊs/. Other examples of the like are shown in Table 4:

Word (W)	Pronunciation (P)	W	P	W	P
bag	/bæg/	have	/həv, /əv/	OK	/əʊ'keɪ/
city	/'sɪti/		/hæv/	small	/smɔ:l/
concert	/'kɒnsət/	kilometers	/'kɪləmi:təʳ/	year	/jɪəʳ/or /jɜ:ʳ/
engineering	/,endʒɪ'niəriŋ/		/kɪ'lɒmɪtəʳ/	your	/jɔ:ʳ/ or /jəʳ/

Table 4. Correct pronunciation of words assimilated to Spanish pronunciation

English has a wide range of phonetic possibilities, so students easily mix and get confused by the different pronunciations of the same words in each dialect or accent. This causes the opposite “phenomenon” of what has been just described; that is, students try to pronounce some words with *their* “English accent” instead of the real one. This happens with words such as character /'kærəktəʳ/, chemistry /'kemɪstri/, practise /'præktɪs/, since /sɪns/ and weather /'weðəʳ/.

On the other hand, as Peters (2012: 3) claimed, some sounds in English are not represented by a single letter, but by some combinations. For instance, ‘th’ represents the sound /θ/. This leads to two different types of mispronunciations: first, confusing the pronunciation of some phonemes due to the order of the letters, e.g. daughter /'dɔ:təʳ/, or to the appearance of two different phonemes represented by the same letter in a single word, e.g. theatre /'θɪətəʳ/. Second, ignoring the combination and uttering the word considering just one of its letters, e.g. athlete /'æθli:t/ or both /bəʊθ/.

Some mispronunciations simply arise when confusing some words with others which are usually minimal pairs. Common cases are provided in Table 5:

Pair (word + pronunciation)		
<u>beer</u> /bɪəʳ/ - <u>bear</u> /beəʳ/	<u>flaw</u> /flɔ:/ - <u>flew</u> /flu:/	<u>read</u> /ri:d/ - <u>ride</u> /raɪd/
<u>birth</u> /bɜ:θ/ - <u>bird</u> /bɜ:d/	<u>give</u> /gɪv/ - <u>gift</u> /gɪft/	<u>see</u> /si:/ - <u>say</u> /seɪ/
<u>cheer</u> /tʃɪəʳ/ - <u>chair</u> /tʃeəʳ/	<u>great</u> /greɪt/ - <u>greet</u> /gri:t/	<u>she</u> /ʃi:/ or /ʃi/ - <u>six</u> /sɪks/
<u>clothes</u> /kləʊðz/ or /kləʊz/ - <u>clouds</u> /klaʊdz/	<u>her</u> /hɜ:ʳ/ or /həʳ/ - <u>here</u> /hɪəʳ/	<u>some</u> /sʌm/ or /səm/ - <u>sun</u> /sʌn/
<u>eat</u> /i:t/ - <u>heat</u> /hi:t/	<u>laugh</u> /lɑ:f/ - <u>loud</u> /laʊd/	<u>son</u> /sʌn/ - <u>soon</u> /su:n/
<u>eaten</u> /'i:tn/ - <u>eighteen</u> /,eɪ'ti:n/	<u>now</u> /naʊ/ - <u>know</u> /nəʊ/	<u>three</u> /θri:/ - <u>trees</u> /tri:/
<u>eight</u> /eɪt/ - <u>age</u> /eɪdʒ/	<u>plan</u> /plæn/ - <u>plane</u> /pleɪn/	<u>tip</u> /tɪp/ - <u>tie</u> /taɪ/ - <u>types</u> /taɪp/

Table 5. Correct pronunciation of words usually confused or mixed

3.2. Grammar and vocabulary

At B1 level, students must have *general linguistic range* as well as *vocabulary range and control*. In short, this means, according to the CEFR, to have “a sufficient range of language to describe unpredictable situations, explain the main points in an idea or problem with reasonable precision and express thoughts on abstract or cultural topics” as well as to have sufficient vocabulary on a wide range of familiar topics. At this point, *grammatical accuracy* is also needed, which means to communicate “with reasonable accuracy in familiar contexts” even if some mother-tongue influence remains and to convey clear meaning by accurately employing “a repertoire of frequently used routines and patterns associated with more predictable situations”. Thus, there are some basic errors that should not be made at this communicative level and which are described as in the following paragraphs.

Adjectives in Spanish are placed after the noun and need the agreement in number with the noun, whereas adjectives and nouns in English typically post-modify head nouns. This and noun phrases are challenging for Spanish learners because “for them the elements of the phrase would more naturally be expressed in the reverse order” (Coe 2001: 99). By way of illustration take the following common errors: “a differents article”, “they look like happies”, “class English” or “the chocolate is a cake favourite”.

Another frequent error with adjectives is not distinguishing between –ed and –ing adjectives or between adjectives and nouns, as in the following phrases or sentences: “I like being relaxing”, “I’m interesting in lesson 3”, “a sun day”, “my sister is professional player football” or “the girl is dark hair”. Regarding adjectives, the comparative and superlative structures are also difficult for Spaniards as in Spanish *más* (more) is added to the adjective in all cases unlike in English. This results in phrases like: “it’s more cheaper”, “it’s most crowd”, “other place more big”.

Singular and plural agreement is also problematic for several reasons: a) as said before, students tend to add an –s to adjectives by analogy with Spanish. So it is an error to say: “two reds houses”. b) Some nouns are always plural. Therefore, phrases like “a glasses”, “a sweets” or “a trousers” or “people is” are an error. c) On the contrary, some words always end in –s but are singular (e.g. news) or either singular or plural (e.g. series). Finally, d) some words are countable in Spanish whereas they are uncountable in English (e.g. bread, cheese or health, among others). It must be noted here that, although verb inflection in English is not as in Spanish since many verb forms are the same for different persons, there is a difference between the third person singular and the other persons. Thus, phrases like “the flat have”, “my father live” or “there are a lot of grass” are serious errors.

It is commonly said that once one masters the usage of prepositions in a foreign language, then one masters the language. For Spaniards, as observed in the analysis, typical errors involving prepositions are: selecting the incorrect preposition (e.g. “from I was born”, “depend of”, “think in” or “I’m good in football); using a preposition in a context where it is prohibited, including employing wrong double prepositions (e.g. “for on holiday”, “for to visit”, “tell with them” or “I’ve lived in Albacete for four years ago”); and failing to use a preposition in a context where it is obligatory (e.g. “can you say me”, “I want pass” or “go this city”). Moreover, as Chodorow *et al.* (2007: 26) remark, English has hundreds of phrasal verbs, that is, a verb and a particle that sometimes is a preposition; what is more, some phrasal verbs are also and often used with prepositions (i.e. “give up on someone”). Therefore, this makes phrasal verbs particularly intricate for

foreigners to master due to their non-compositionality of meaning, which forces the learner to learn long lists of phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs and adjectives by heart.

Owing to Spanish verb inflections, in this language it is not necessary to use a subject, especially in the case of pronouns, as the recipient knows who the speaker is referring to just because of the verb. However, in English every conjugated verb needs a subject. This causes two types of mistakes: on the one hand, omitting a necessary subject (e.g. “because is very beautiful”, “I think that is a mark” or “is depend”); and on the other hand, using double subjects, especially in relative clauses (e.g. “my first job it wasn’t as a teacher” or “I know a friend who he is a nurse”).

Despite not having inflections, English verbs are difficult for Spaniards for several reasons apart from the ones mentioned before. On the one hand, auxiliary verbs, which make students omit the main or the auxiliary verb (e.g. “do you other activity?” or “we can a lot of money”) or even use an “extra” auxiliary verb when it is prohibited, especially in questions like “what do about you?”. And on the other hand, contractions, especially regarding their pronunciation (e.g. “I from Albacete” or “I 24 years old”). Verb patterns are also hard, since students have to learn those verbs followed by infinitive, gerund or bare infinitive by heart. In relation to this matter, common errors include: selecting the wrong pattern (e.g. “I could teaching”, “we can to celebrate” or “I prefer don’t have a pet”); or, otherwise, omitting it (e.g. “I hope go to the beach” or “I like play computer”).

In this same vein, tenses are also an obstacle for Spaniards, since “the same” tenses are not used in similar contexts (e.g. Present Continuous or future) or anisomorphism occurs, for example when there are two or more different tenses in Spanish which correspond to a single one in English (e.g. Past Perfect and *pretérito perfecto compuesto* or *pretérito pluscuamperfecto* in the indicative mood). However, there are times when students simply select the wrong tense, for instance, for habits (e.g. “I hardly ever going shopping”) or for past actions (e.g. “I meet with my friends last month”). Moreover, students sometimes forget to conjugate verbs, especially ‘to be’ (e.g. “I always be here) or conjugate them wrong (e.g. “they looks funny”); they also forget to use the -(e)s morpheme in the third person singular (e.g. “it seem a holiday”); or, as said before, omit the auxiliary or main verbs or, on the contrary, add them when it is prohibited (e.g. “are you agree?”); or simply choose the wrong verb form (e.g. “I have working”, “I’m study” or “she’s go to the supermarket”).

Other common grammatical errors are: not using the appropriate pronoun, including relatives and frequent references to the second singular person (e.g. “I don’t see she well”, “the photo who was taken”, “with ours”, “baby animals are your favourite” or “you and me have”); not making the difference between *a* and *an* (e.g. “a English certificate” or “an university”); choosing wrong collocations (e.g. “do a cake”), even if they imply great differences in meaning (e.g. *black* vs. *dark* eyes, *fun* vs. *funny*, or *career* vs. *degree*); confusing parts of speech, especially nouns and adjectives (e.g. *health* vs. *healthy*); wrong word order, mainly in reported questions (e.g. I don’t know where are you going); double negatives (e.g. “I don’t like football nothing”); adding the -(e)s morpheme to irregular plurals (“two childrens” or “three mens”); mixing some easily confused verbs or pairs (e.g. *wear* and *carry* or *weather* and *time*); and literal translations, including the usage of *false friends* (“put music”, *signature* vs. *subject*, *target* vs. *card*).

A solution to this problem lies in grammar and vocabulary exercises. However, they might also be the origin of it, since traditionally materials and resources aimed at teaching English did not usually connect this kind of practice with free production; that is, exercises usually consisted in matching or filling in the gaps. A

possibility to tackle this problem, which has already been included in new materials, is to prioritise free-production activities and link grammar and vocabulary practice or exercises to guided or free production progressively more extensive.

3.3. Fluency and oral interaction

As explained before, the last and longest part of the oral exam, the joint task, is devoted to the oral interaction skill via a 6-minute pair discussion. This is done through a proposed mock situation which usually implies decision-making as a means to boost conversation, such as planning a holiday, a night out or a birthday party.

A correct performance implies *taking the floor (turntaking)* by taking the initiative and starting a conversation framing the context, by reaching conclusions and by closing it at the end; *co-operating*, or easing interaction by paving the way for the partner to intervene, and to make sure they understand, and *asking for clarification*, or asking for explanations when needed.

A repeated complaint when reviewing the exams refers to comparisons with their partners, usually regarded as a disadvantage. Some of them who perceived the other candidate as having superior oral skills tended to consider them as opponents undermining their possibilities of success, while those who felt more proficient claimed their counterparts hampered communication, even when their cooperation techniques were assessed individually.

This inability when having to produce a day-to-day dialogue in an examination context reflects that pair work, normally included in every lesson of ESL, is not producing the desirable effects. It may also point to the long tradition of master classes in Spain in non-linguistic subjects, together with the lack of practice in any kind of oral exam. It would be therefore desirable in future research to compare the impact of cooperative learning or group work in contrast with more individualistic or competitive learning approaches.

Moreover, English is a practical field, which means that practising is the only way that leads to improvement. Likewise, the authors can affirm from their experience and analysis that people usually make the same mistakes, so detecting them individually is the only solution to avoid them.

At the same time, spoken fluency at the threshold stage is defined by the CEFR as the ability to express oneself “with relative ease despite some problems with formulation resulting in pauses” as well as to “keep going effectively without help”. Furthermore, this aspect includes being able to “keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production”. Length of speech run and frequency and distribution of silent pauses become just one more aspect to be considered besides appropriate speech rate (Rossiter *et al.* 2010: 584-585). These pauses are therefore acceptable, as they are still needed to find the formulations they need in L2 (Hincks 2010). The ability to deal with them efficiently becomes a key point to succeed in the exam, since it is considered in all its three parts.

One frequent measure to avoid gaps in conversation is the inclusion of words or expressions in their L1, Spanish. This kind of mismanagement implies students generally perceive interrupted speech as more inappropriate than making use of another language, even when the content may not be easily guessed by an English speaker unless they could speak Spanish. Often students found this *illicit* use of the common language satisfactory and usually reinforce it with non-linguistic communication to ensure the resource is

accepted by the teachers. They did not seem to make the effort to find the right expressions in English as they decided to use their native language when necessary to keep acceptable fluency, therefore producing quite awkward Spanglish results revealing vocabulary and grammar deficiencies. This is considered as a strong indicator of nonfluent speech (Mora 2006: 78) and may well be solved with adequate use of gambits, discourse markers and non-lexical fillers such as “um” or “uh”. It would be also advisable to encourage students to say some formulas to gain for some time to think when necessary (e.g. “What could I say about this?”, “just let me think for a moment”).

The examples excerpted from the transcripts of the examinations are exposed in Table 6:

Awkward word / expression	Correct expression
...drink <i>a copa</i> on Saturday	Going for a drink on Saturday
It's <i>ciencia ficción</i>	It's science fiction
...make <i>trampas</i> ³	Cheat (on a game)
... <i>salud</i> centre	Health centre
The <i>guion</i> is good	The script is good
<i>Torre Eiffel</i>	Eiffel Tower

Table 6. Insertion of Spanish words in the speech

This situation is more frequent in the introduction, which is seemingly not perceived as a part of the exam itself, even when the beginning of the recording would make its length clear. This can be observed in some of the examples excerpted from the transcript at the beginning of the exam and shown in Table 7:

Word / expression in Spanish	English word / expression
<i>Buenas</i>	Good morning
<i>Giménez con G</i>	Giménez starting with a G
<i>Vale</i>	OK

Table 7. Preliminary interaction in English

Many students make use of Spanish through the whole examination in order to communicate with their exam partners. The interaction with the examiners is often done in Spanish as a kind of parallel speech to make sure instructions were correctly understood, to justify mistakes or even to ask for explicit help in their listening or speaking or to show despair in a kind of inner speech.

Words / expression in Spanish	Word / expression in Spanish
Used to interact with their exam partners	
<i>¿Cuál quieres?</i>	Which one do you want?
<i>Me da igual</i>	I don't care
<i>No lo sé</i>	I don't know
Interaction with the examiners	
<i>¿Empiezo yo?</i>	Shall I start?
<i>¿Seguimos?</i>	Shall we continue?
<i>Es que estoy un poco nervioso</i>	It's just that I'm a little nervous
<i>Pensaba que...</i>	I thought...

³ Moreover, in cases like this, the word wrongly used (*trampas*) could be related to the word “tramp” as a false friend, conveying a totally distorted meaning instead of the idea of tricking or cheating.

<i>Perdón</i>	Sorry
<i>¿Cómo se dice?</i>	I can't remember right now a word to express that thing...
[Who do you live with?] <i>¿Que dónde quiero vivir?</i>	Are you asking me about where I would like to live?
Internal monologue	
<i>Joder</i>	Oh, no
<i>Madre mía</i>	Oh, dear

Table 8. Other interactions in Spanish

Therefore, communication strategies should be emphasised in training programmes. Furthermore, this use of Spanish shows either that English-only classroom policies are not generalised or that many students have rarely interacted with their teachers before. Fluency could be also improved by the generalisation of free communication activities of increasing duration and complexity.

4. Conclusions

Considering the above, we could claim that general results in B1 oral examinations are not satisfactory, especially for students who have been learning English at least since they were six years old, as used to be established in the Spanish educational system. The errors and mistakes observed in our analysis cover all seven qualitative aspects of spoken language described by the CEFR. However, the main difficulties seem to concentrate on pronunciation, grammar, fluency and the persistence of L1 as a means of communication.

The reasons may be various and their analyses go beyond this paper. However, some assumptions can be made for future training programmes:

1. Regardless of the method chosen for their preparation for the exam, English-only policies should be adopted so as to ensure the acquisition of classroom language that may solve any possible situation that may arise in the exam.
2. Guided and monitored pair work should be promoted, supervised by the teacher and exposed to the class on a regular basis.
3. Listening may be linked to oral production so as to guarantee the imitation of English pronunciation, rhythm, stress and intonation.

Thus, students have to make the effort to communicate only in English during their preparation period by becoming aware of the importance of oral skills and assuming errors as a part of the learning process. Teachers or exam trainers should find a method of their own that encourages oral production –in English only and without stopping them– and create fun methods to let students confront their mistakes and errors in a friendly and safe classroom environment.

References

- Alcaraz, E. and B. Moody. 1999. *Fonética inglesa para españoles. Teoría y práctica*. Alcoy: Marfil.
- Alcoba, S. and J. Murillo. 1998. "Intonation in Spanish". In D. Hirst and A. Di Cristo (eds.) *Intonation Systems. A Survey of Twenty Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 152-166.
- Chodorow, M., J. R. Tetreault and N. R. Han. 2007. "Detection of Gramatical Errors Involving Prepositions". *Proceedings of the 4th ACL-SISGEM Workshop on Prepositions*, 25-30.

- Clark, J., C. Yallop and J. Fletcher. 2007. *An Introduction to Phonetics and Phonology. Third Edition*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Coe, N. 2001. "Speakers of Spanish and Catalan". In M. Swan and B. Smith (eds.) *Learner English. Second Edition. A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha. 2010. "15624 Ley 7/2010, de 20 de julio, de Educación de Castilla-La Mancha". *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 248, 86359-86415.
- Consejería de Educación y Ciencia. 2005. "Orden de 07-02-2005, de la Consejería de Educación y Ciencia, por la que se crea el Programa de Secciones Europeas en centros públicos de educación Infantil, Primaria y Secundaria de la Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha". *Diario Oficial de Castilla-La Mancha*, 40, 3582-3590.
- Consejería de Educación y Ciencia. 2007. "Orden de 23-04-2007, de la Consejería de Educación y Ciencia, por la que se modifica la Orden de 07-02-2005, por la que se crea el programa de Secciones Europeas, y se amplía mediante convocatoria el número de centros públicos de enseñanzas no universitarias con secciones europeas en la Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha". *Diario Oficial de Castilla-La Mancha*, 93, 11007-11012.
- Consejería de Educación y Ciencia. 2008. "Orden de 13 de marzo de 2008, de la Consejería de Educación y Ciencia, por la que se regula el desarrollo del Programa de Secciones Europeas en los centros públicos de Educación Infantil, Primaria y Secundaria de la Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha". *Diario Oficial de Castilla-La Mancha*, 64.
- Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deportes. 2013. "Orden de 23/10/2013, de la Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deportes, por la que se modifica la Orden de 13/03/2008, de la Consejería de Educación y Ciencia, por la que se regula el desarrollo del Programa de Secciones Europeas en los centros públicos de Educación Infantil, Primaria y Secundaria de la Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha. [2013/14831]". *Diario Oficial de Castilla-La Mancha*, 235, 32510-32511.
- Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deportes. 2014. "Decreto 7/2014, de 22/01/2014, por el que se regula el plurilingüismo en la enseñanza no universitaria en Castilla-La Mancha [2014/897]". *Diario Oficial de Castilla-La Mancha* 17, 1657-1661.
- Consejo de Gobierno de la UCLM. 2013. "Acreditación del conocimiento de una lengua extranjera para la obtención del título de Grado en la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha y para el acceso a determinados estudios de Máster Universitario". http://www.uclm.es/organos/vic_docencia/normativa.asp?opt=2
- Hincks, R. 2010. "Speaking rate and information content in English lingua franca oral presentations". *English for Specific Purposes*, 29/1, 4-18.
- Hirst, D. 1998. "Intonation in British English". In D. Hirst and A. Di Cristo (eds.) *Intonation Systems. A Survey of Twenty Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56-77.
- Jefatura del Estado. 2013. "12886, Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa". *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 295, 97858-97921.
- Language Policy Division, Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lizdas, S. 2010. "How does Phonological Awareness in Spanish Differ from Phonological Awareness in English, and How can I Use Multicultural Spanish Songs and Poems to Develop it?". *MMSD Classroom Action Research. Dual Language Immersion*, 2, 1-26.
- Mora, J. C. 2006. "Age effects on Oral Fluency Development". In C. Muñoz (ed.) *Age and the Rate of Foreign Language Teaching*. Clevedon / Tonawanda, NY / North York, Ontario: SLA Second Language Acquisition, 65-88. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 152-166.
- Peters, J. 2012. "Silent Letters in English". <https://ctools.umich.edu/access/content/user/petersja/Public%20Portfolio%20Files/Silent%20Letters%20in%20English.pdf>
- Rossiter, M. J., T. Derwing, L. G. Manimtim and R. I. Thomson, 2010. "Oral Fluency: The Neglected Component in the Communicative Language Classroom". *The Canadian Modern Language Review / La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 66/4, 583-603.

Dr. Raquel Sánchez Ruiz is a lecturer at the Faculty of Education of Albacete (University of Castilla-La Mancha), where she teaches English Language (A2, B1 and B2 levels) and Didactics for Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers as well as Education Innovation in Secondary Education. She wrote her PhD thesis on discourse analysis in George Ridpath's political writings (2014), received a scholarship to research in Roehampton University, London

(2011) and has published articles on Discourse Analysis and English Teaching/Learning in peer-reviewed journals. She is interested in English Didactics, Foreign Language Acquisition and Discourse Analysis.

Dr. Isabel López Cirugeda is a lecturer at the Faculty of Education of Albacete (University of Castilla-La Mancha), where she teaches English Language (B1 and B2 levels) and Didactics for Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers as well as Research on Education Innovation in Secondary Education. She wrote her PhD thesis on female characters in Dorothy Parker's fictional narrative (2008), received a scholarship to research in Harvard University (2010) coedited the collective volume *De Toledo a Moscú* (2010) and has published articles on Applied Linguistics and Discourse Analysis in peer-reviewed journals. She is also interested in Foreign Language Acquisition in Early Childhood Education.