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# Exposure, Attitudes and Proficiency Level of English among School Children in Spain

## Exposição, Atitudes e Nível de Proficiência de Inglês entre jovens estudantes na Espanha

**ABSTRACT** – This paper provides an up-to-date overview of the current role of English among Spanish young students. To that end, an analysis of three important issues has been carried out. First, this research focuses on the different opportunities of the students to be in contact with English outside the classroom. Secondly, the attitudes of the participants have been examined using three different indicators; students' likeability, the importance of English, and the advantages for them of knowing English. Thirdly, the participants have self-assessed their level of proficiency in English in the four different skills. The outcomes reveal that young participants have a limited contact with English, and it is basically through music, radio, books, computers and television. As regards the students' attitudes towards English, the results prove the positive attitude of the respondents. Finally, the participants' self-assessment of their proficiency in English is positive, though some questions that require a reflection are included in the discussion.

**Key words:** Spain, young students, attitudes, proficiency level in English.

**RESUMO** – Este artigo fornece uma visão geral do papel atual do Inglês entre os jovens estudantes espanhóis. Para esse fim, uma análise de três questões importantes foi realizada. Em primeiro lugar, esta pesquisa enfoca as diferentes oportunidades dos alunos de estar em contato com o Inglês fora da sala de aula. Em segundo lugar, as atitudes dos participantes foram examinadas por meio de três diferentes indicadores; likeability dos alunos, a importância do Inglês, e as vantagens para eles de saber Inglês. Em terceiro lugar, os participantes auto-avaliaram seu nível de proficiência em Inglês nas quatro habilidades. Os resultados revelam que os jovens participantes têm um contato limitado com o Inglês, que se dá basicamente por meio da música, rádio, livros, computadores e televisão. No que diz respeito às atitudes dos alunos frente ao Inglês, os resultados comprovam a atitude positiva dos entrevistados. Finalmente, a auto-avaliação de sua proficiência em Inglês é positiva, ainda que algumas questões que requerem reflexão estejam incluídas na discussão.

**Palavras-chave:** Espanha, jovens estudantes, atitudes, nível de proficiência em Inglês.

### Introduction

The impact of English across the globe has been the subject of a vast volume of literature (Anderman and Rogers, 2005; Berns *et al.*, 2007; Fischer and Pulaczewska, 2008; Furiassi *et al.*, 2012; Görlach, 2002) as well as the leading topic of many conferences around the world. Globalisation, development of economic and technological infrastructure as well as ‘the issue of the ‘new’ Europe are interrelated matters that today’s young Europeans will have to grapple with as they carry on the building of an increasingly interconnected and unified Europe’ (Berns *et al.*, 2007, p. 43). The need to use a language as the main vehicle of communication to interconnect all those people who are moving around Europe has contributed to make English the *lingua franca* that fulfils this function. Since the twentieth century onwards, English has become the main language of international communication. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the situation has become even more prominent in terms of English presence as this century advances.

The increasing contact of English in every realm of Europeans’ daily life and the perception of English as the *fashionable* language are mostly linked to Europeans’ attitudes towards this language. The attitudes of Europeans’ non-native speakers of English towards English is crucial for so many English terms find their way into the different European languages. A few of the many pieces of research which have provided evidence on the presence of anglicisms in different European languages are the following: (Hilgendorf, 2007; Johansson and Graedler, 2005; Luján-García, 2011; Martin, 2007). In a study carried out in Finland, Ranta (2010) also proves that ‘Finnish students and teachers are well aware of the lingua franca role of English in the ‘real world’.

The context of Spain is also under this tremendous influence. Spain being a multilingual context, the presence of English may be evidenced in every domain of Spaniards’ daily lives, and the attitudes or perceptions of Spanish speakers play a crucial role for this to happen. Different works (Lasagabaster, 2003; Luján-García,

2003; Lasagabaster and Huguet, 2007) have focused on the importance of linguistic attitudes in Spain and they all report on the positive attitudes and perceptions of Spanish people towards the English language.

The role of English in the Spanish educational system has been analysed by other authors (Rodríguez González, 2002; Reichelt, 2006). All of them state that English is the first foreign language studied (students start learning it at the age of 3), and it is gradually becoming more important at each level. An evidence of this is the increasing implementation of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) programme in most of the Spanish autonomous communities, as well as the proliferation of private schools that offer a bilingual programme (Spanish / English) that not every family can afford due to its high costs. Well-known authors such as Lasagabaster (2009) prove the importance of attitudes towards English for the L2 learning process and programmes such as CLIL to be successful in some research carried out in the Spanish autonomous community of the Basque country.

It is beyond doubt that within the multilingual and multicultural context of Europe, it is essential that European educational systems give an increasing importance to the learning of foreign languages (Lasagabaster, 2008, p. 31). Different studies have researched on various variables which may have an impact of second language acquisition. Muñoz (2006) analyses the importance of student's age; Oxford (1993) and Kobayashi (2002) report on gender differences and they highlight that female students tend to be better at studying foreign languages than male students are. The variable motivation has also been examined by different researchers (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1982; Spolsky, 1969).

Therefore, there are a number of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that may influence a learner when acquiring a second language. This piece of research examines some sociological aspects which have an impact on the learning of English namely the kind and length of exposure of the students to the foreign language they are studying; the linguistic attitudes towards that language; the degree of usefulness of the language, and another more subjective aspect such as its likeability. In order to address all these issues, this study uses a sample of Spanish students (primary and secondary levels) from different autonomous communities. In addition, the last section of this work reveals a self-assessment of the respondents of their own level of proficiency in English.

Considering the complexity and magnitude of issues such as globalisation, the proliferation of the Internet, and other digital media, and the impact of English on Spain, this paper intends to provide evidence on the important role that English is currently playing in this country by analysing and interrelating the different referred linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. Therefore, admittedly the broad nature of this issue and the com-

plexity of attitudinal constructs, this small scale research intends to shed some light on these complex matters in the specific context of Spain.

## Objectives

In general terms, this paper provides up-to-date evidence about the young students' orientation towards English in Spain by focusing on different areas. The specific objectives are listed as:

- *Contact with English*: To focus on the different opportunities that Spanish young students have to be in contact with English outside the classroom and through the media.

- *Language attitudes*: To examine the attitudes towards English of the participants in terms of likeability, importance and usefulness of this language.

- *English proficiency*: To carry out a self-assessment of the participants' level of proficiency in the four linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

## Method

This study has concentrated on a sample of young Spanish students. The main reason to study this specific section of the population is because the younger generations are the 'key players in the process of globalisation- both in acting upon and reacting to it' as Berns *et al.* (2007, p. 43) suggest.

With this aim in mind, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of the Spanish young population in different areas of Spain. The survey was adapted from Berns *et al.* (2007). The reason for choosing this survey model was because it dealt with the three main issues that I wanted to analyse in this study (contact with English; language attitudes and English proficiency). It was adapted to fit the particular context of this study, since Berns *et al.*'s study was carried out in a variety of countries (Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands) whereas this work focused only on the context of Spain. Therefore, all those questions dealing with the specific contexts of the different countries involved in Berns *et al.*'s study were discarded. Most of the rest of the questions which could be applied to the context of Spain were kept.

The survey was carefully translated into Spanish by the researcher, and it was tested with a small sample (20 respondents) of primary and secondary education students. They found some words hard to understand, and those terms were replaced by simpler ones. After these minor changes, and considering that the questionnaire had already been employed in another international investigation (Berns *et al.*, 2007), the questionnaire was validated to be used as our tool of research.

It was composed of five different sections. The first one compiled some personal information on the participants such as their educational level, age and gender.

The second part of the survey intended to find out what the level of proficiency of the participants' parents and one sibling were. The reason to limit to just one sibling was because there are students who have more than one sibling, whereas others do not even have one. Establishing one sibling allowed to set a reasonable average. The third section dealt with the respondents' opportunities to be in contact with English through the media. The next part studied the students' opportunities to be in contact with English outside school. The following section of the questionnaire intended to study what the attitudes of the participants towards English were. The last part focused on the participants' self-assessment of their own level of proficiency in English.

It is important to highlight that using a questionnaire may imply certain limitations. However, in this study, despite its limitations, this tool was considered as the most appropriate one to gather information quickly and efficiently in different parts of Spain. The survey was totally anonymous, and it was administered during the months of January, February, March and April of 2011. In order to carry out the statistical analysis of the results, the programme SPSS was used.

### **Sample**

As explained before, the sample used was composed of young people from different areas of Spain.

The age of the participants ranged from 10 to 20 years old. The survey was administered in the following regions of Spain: Galicia, Valencia, Madrid, La Rioja, Andalusia and the Canary Islands. The number of participants was around 40<sup>1</sup> in each autonomous community, except in Andalusia, where a smaller sample was collected. The sample intended to cover various backgrounds: a tourist area such as the Canary Islands, a rural area such as La Rioja, and a tourist and industrial area such as Valencia, which would create a balance in terms of number of visitors and the use of English in everyday life. In that sense, the results obtained would not be biased by the background<sup>2</sup>.

The schools involved were statal, and the levels ranged from primary (highest grade) to secondary education, as shown in Table 1.

The young people who took part in this study ranged in age from 10 to 20 years old (mean of 15). Table 2 shows the ages of the participants.

With regard to the gender of the participants, the sample was composed of approximately the same number of girls (49.8) and boys (50.2), as shown in Table 3.

Before describing the results obtained, it is of great importance to depict in broad terms the *linguistic background* of Spain. The home language of most of the participants is Spanish, as it is the official language of Spain. However, Spain being a multilingual country, in certain autonomous communities the linguistic situation is slightly different, as two official languages co-exist. This is the case

**Table 1.** Number of subjects from each school type and autonomous community.

School type	Andalusia	Canary Islands	Valencia	Galicia	Madrid	La Rioja	Total
Primary School	20	0	48	0	2	18	88
Secondary School	0	41	0	40	38	22	141
N							229

**Table 2.** Ages of subjects

	Percentage	Frequency	N
10-15 years	77.3	177	
16-20 years	22.7	52	
Total Number			229

<sup>1</sup> The sample of around 40 students in each of the analysed autonomous community was taken from primary and secondary state school students in order to have a wide view of Spanish compulsory education. At these levels, English is an obligatory subject. Participants were selected randomly. It means that criteria such as their marks in English were not used to choose the student participants. The researcher considered that this criterium could have biased the results obtained.

<sup>2</sup> Future research focusing on the attitudes and preferences of participants considering different variables such as different regions, or different genders could provide insightful evidence. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

of Galicia, Valencia and Catalonia (this last one not included in this study), where Spanish co-exist along with Galician, Valencian and Catalan languages. As a consequence, this means that for many (but not all) of the students involved in this research, English is not their second language, but their third one. They study Spanish and their respective native languages, with English thus placed in the third position in terms of number of teaching hours.

## Results

Different sections of the survey presented similar questions in order to check that the responses of the participants were not contradictory. In the following section, the descriptive findings on the presence of English are provided. The analyses in this study were carried out in a descriptive way.

### **English proficiency of parents and siblings**

The students were provided with a 6-point scale (from *nothing at all* to *very good*) to indicate the level of proficiency in English of their parents and one of their siblings.

The descriptors for the scores are 0= nothing at all; 1= very poor; 2= poor; 3= acceptable (not so bad and not so good); 4= good; 5= very good.

The results reveal that the average proficiency level of English is reported to be quite low in general terms. The estimated mean level of fathers and mothers is 2, which is *poor*. The means of proficiency among siblings is slightly higher, 2.8, which ranges between *poor* and *acceptable* (not so good and not so poor). Therefore, the mean score of the siblings is a bit higher than their parents'. This is

quite reasonable, considering the fact that French used to be the compulsory foreign language to be studied in Spain some decades ago (Rodríguez González, 2002, p. 134). From the Eighties onwards, English started being the first foreign language to be studied in the Spanish educational system. This is in addition to the increasing interest which has emerged for studying foreign languages among the youngest generations, as the result of globalisation and the influence of the Anglo-American culture. As Reichelt (2006, p. 3) asserts, the Spanish authorities are determined to increase the levels of proficiency in English among the youngster. Those efforts start to become evident.

### **Opportunities to be in contact with English through the media**

The next section of the questionnaire focused on the participants' habits of using English through the media in some aspects of daily life. A four-point scale (0=less than once a month; 1=1 to 3 times a month; 2= once a week; 3= more than once a week) was provided to students in order to indicate how often they were in contact with English through the media.

In this section, I will analyse in depth the answers provided by participants for each of the examined items. The following table shows the findings of this section of the study.

With respect to *listening to the radio* in English, as the data show in Table 5, the highest score (78.9) is for those respondents who listen to the radio in English *less than once a month*. Radio stations which broadcast in English are more and more popular in Spain, especially in tourist areas. According to data taken from the website [www.listenlive.eu](http://www.listenlive.eu), in Spain there is a total of 169 radio

**Table 3.** Gender of subjects

	Percentage	Frequency	N
Boys	50.2	115	
Girls	49.8	114	
Total Number			229

**Table 4.** Percentages with the English language proficiency of the fathers, mothers and siblings of the participants.

English proficiency of...	Mean	S.D.	N
fathers	2.0	1.5	223
mothers	2.0	1.5	226
siblings	2.8	1.4	161

**Table 5.** Participants' sources of contact with English in terms of percentages

	Less than once a month	1-3 times a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Total
Listening to the radio in English	78.9	6.6	7.5	7	227
Listening to music in English	9.7	9.7	9.7	70.8	226
Understanding what the lyrics say	22.6	18.1	17.3	42	226
Watching films in English	70.4	16.8	7.1	5.8	226
Using chats or forums in English	66.5	14.1	9.3	10.1	227
Visiting websites in English	47.6	23.8	11.9	16.7	227

stations which broadcast on the Internet. From this figure, 20 of these radio stations<sup>3</sup> are totally in English (11.8% of the total of Spanish radio stations broadcasting on the Internet). However, the findings show that Spanish young students are not very familiar with or, at least, do not listen to these radio stations. The situation in other European countries (Germany, Belgium and Holland, France) is quite similar, since a majority of participants in Berns *et al.* (2007, p. 60) listen to radio programmes in English *less than once a week*.

As regards the habit of *listening to music* in English, the outcomes are completely different from the ones obtained in the previous question. Table 5 reveals that the highest percentage (70.8) is for those participants who listen to music in English *more than once a week*, and 9.7 of respondents do it *once a week*. The young students, the object of this study, seem to be very familiar with music in English. It has to be considered that many bands choose English as the language for their lyrics, as they come across as cool and fashionable, and these bands may reach an international audience more easily.

Closely related with the prior question, when the students were asked whether they *try to understand what the lyrics in English say*, the findings show that the highest percentage (42+17.3) of participants state that they make the effort to understand the lyrics of the songs *once or more than once a week*, as Table 5 shows. It implies that there is a constant contact with English among respondents through music or, in other words, music is an important source of contact with English for the participants.

After being asked for their habit of *watching films in original version*, the highest score (70.4) of respondents replied that they do not usually watch films in English (see Table 5). This finding is to be expected in Spain, where there is a long tradition of dubbing films. Spanish

people are not used to watching films in original version with subtitles, but instead they watch dubbed films. By contrast, the situation changes dramatically in other European countries, where young people are quite used to watching English language TV programmes and films. According to Berns *et al.* (2007, p. 61), about 90% of Dutch students, 80% of German respondents, 70% of Belgian participants and 50% of French respondents watch English TV programmes at least *once a week*. Watching films in original version is a very important source of contact with English for citizens of Northern European countries (The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland among others), but unfortunately this is not the case of Spain.

The next question inquired whether the participants usually *take part in chats or forums in English*. The findings show that the highest amount of respondents (66.5) do not tend to participate in chats and forums in English. In any case, the rest of the figures demonstrate that there is also a lower number of students who participate in this kind of activities in English (see Table 5).

The last question of this section of the survey intended to find out whether the participants usually *visit websites in English*, and the outcomes showed that the highest score (47.6) is for those students who go on these websites *less than once a month*. It seems surprising considering the great amount of websites in English that may be visited on the network. Another considerable percentage is for those students who go on websites in English *1-3 times a month*, as shown in Table 5. It is worth mentioning that even though some websites are not totally in English, part of their content is in English. Probably, as students study at higher levels and attend more specialised classes, for example, at university, they will need to visit more specific websites in order to become informed about a particular topic.

<sup>3</sup> These radio stations are: Ace FM, The Beat, Bay Radio, Central FM, Coast FM, Cool FM, Excite FM, Heart FM, Global Radio, UK Away FM, Torre FM, TKO Gold, TKO Gold, Ocean FM, Hot FM, JFM Radio, Smile FM, Sunshine FM, Spectrum FM, Talk Radio Europe.

## **Opportunities to be in contact with English outside school**

This section, which complements the previous one, focuses on the degree of contact with English outside school. Even though reference to some media is made in this part of the questionnaire, this question includes more points of reference about other reasons participants may have to be in contact with English. The following table summarises the results obtained in this section. A four-point scale was provided to students; *never*, *sometimes*, *often* and *very often*, in order to choose the answer that best fits their habits.

First, I will focus on the contact of the participants with English *through parents*. A four-point scale (ranging from *never* to *very often*) was used to analyse the frequency of contact with English. The results, which are summarised in Table 6, show that parents are not the participants' main source of contact with English, since 60.4% of respondents assert that they *never* have contact with this language through their parents.

As the subjects of this study are young people, at this age friends are usually quite influential. That is the main reason why the questionnaire included *friends* as a possible source of contact with English. Within the category of friends, both Spanish or international friends were included. As shown in Table 6, the findings reveal that the respondents have a closer contact with English through their friends than through their parents. This seems logical, since the young people share similar interests such as music, cinema or the Internet, and English has an important presence in all these areas.

*Television* is also quite present in our daily life, and that is the motivation to include this item in the questionnaire. There are a number of TV programmes of all kinds (music, travel, even cartoon) that are broadcast with the

aim of attracting a young audience. The results displayed in Table 6 assert that the television is one important source of contact with English for Spanish students, since 36.1 *sometimes* have a contact with English through TV. This figure is increased by the percentages of 11.9 and 9.7 of respondents who are in contact with English through this device *often* and *very often*. It gives a total of 57.7% of participants, which is a higher score than 42.3 of respondents who *never* have a contact with English through TV.

As explained before, Spain is a country with a long tradition of dubbing films and all kinds of TV programmes. However, with the advent of DTT (digital terrestrial television), people can change to the original version just by pushing a button on the remote control. TV viewers can even add subtitles to the original version film or programme. This technological development, which is relatively recent in Spain, may bring long-term changes, as part of the Spanish audience is likely to get more used to watching films in their original version.

The next examined item was *CDs and music downloads*. It is true that most CDs include music, but there are also some materials such as documentaries, biographies, even teaching / learning materials, which are released in CD format. In this section of the study, I intended to investigate to what extent are these resources influential in the respondents' contact with English. Curiously enough, the participants report that they are in contact with English through these resources, because 23.2 of students chose the option *very often*, 18.9 chose the answer *often*, and 29.8 decided to choose *sometimes*. The sum of these three figures make a percentage of 71.9 of respondents who are in contact with English through these means (see Table 6).

*Newspapers* were also included as an item to be examined, because they are also a kind of media that is part of our current daily life. Newspapers from all over the globe are accessible to most people on the Internet. In

**Table 6.** Contact of participants with English through different sources in terms of percentages

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Total
Parents	60.4	28.6	7.5	3.5	227
Spanish or international friends	49.6	39.5	7.9	3.1	228
Television	42.3	36.1	11.9	9.7	227
CDs, music downloads	28.1	29.8	18.9	23.2	228
Newspapers	86.7	12.4	0.9	--	226
Magazines	67.2	26.6	7	7	229
Books	50.2	38.8	7	3.5	227
Computers	36.3	29.2	17.3	17.3	226
Travelling to foreign countries	61	22.4	10.5	6.1	228

spite of the fact that my perception was that newspapers are probably not the favoured media for the youngest generations, I considered it important to check the impact of newspapers, in terms of English contact by means of the survey. Eventually, I could confirm my initial hypothesis about the lack of contact with English through this kind of media was correct. The results, displayed in Table 6, show that most participants (86.7) do not have contact with English through this kind of media.

Certain kinds of *magazines* are quite popular among young people in Spain. Boys usually enjoy reading magazines about cars, motorbikes, computers and new technologies. By contrast, girls seem to be fonder of reading magazines about fashion, news of celebrities, love stories and so on (Gerritsen *et al.* 2007). Most of these magazines are published in Spanish, but they contain many anglicisms. The results displayed in Table 6 state that the highest percentage (67.2) is for the respondents who *never* have contact with English through magazines. In any case, it means that even though the majority of participants have no contact with English through magazines, there is certain contact with English through this media, as the rest of the options *sometimes*, *often* and *very often* were chosen by a total of 32.8 of respondents.

*Books* were the next item to be analysed, as students are sometimes asked to read a book or short story in English at primary and secondary schools in addition to their own possible interest for reading. The outcomes reveal that the highest percentage (50.2) is for those respondents who stated that they *never* read books in English or some English content. By contrast, (38.8+7+3.5=49.3) of those participants *sometimes*, *often* or *very often* have contact with English through books.

*Computers, tablets and smart phones* were also examined, as they are part of our daily lives and there are many programmes and applications which are in English. In addition to this, some of the possibilities that the Internet offers to be in contact with English (chat, messenger, websites) were included in this section. In principle, these

items were expected to obtain high scores of contact with English, and the results confirmed this hypothesis. Once more the highest score (63.8) is for those students who chose the options *sometimes*, *often* and *very often*. This finding shows that most respondents, to different extents, have some kind of contact with English through these technological tools. The option *never* was chosen by 36.3 of participants.

The last item of this section was *travelling to foreign countries* as another source of being in contact with English. As a consequence of the considerable decrease of flight prices with low-cost companies, flying to foreign countries has become more accessible to many people. Obviously, English is the main language used, the *lingua franca* which allows communication among people whose native languages are not English. However, differently from expected, the results revealed that travelling abroad does not provide many opportunities to be in contact with English among the participants, as the highest score (61) chose that they have *never* travelled abroad. A smaller percentage (22.4) of respondents stated that they have sometime travelled abroad and they have used English while travelling abroad.

### Attitudes towards English

Attitudes towards English were analysed by considering three different questions. The first one asked about its likeability; the second one inquired as to the degree of importance of mastering English for the participants; and the third one asked about the perceived advantages of knowing English.

In the case of the first question, a four-point scale was provided. It ranged from 0=I do not like anything at all; 1=I do not care much about English; 2=I like English a little; 3=I like English very much.

The outcomes presented in Table 7 show that around half of the participants (45.9) assert that they like English *very much*, and the second highest score (27.9) is for those students who like English *a little bit*. These findings report

**Table 7.** Likeability of English by participants

I like English...	Percentage	Frequency	N
Nothing at all	9.2	21	
I do not care	16.6	38	
A little bit	27.9	64	
Quite a lot	45.9	105	
Mean			1453.3
S.D.			21961
Total N			229

that there is a positive attitude towards English among the participants in terms of likeability of this language.

As stated before, the second question asked about the degree of importance attached to knowing English. Again, a four-point scale was included in the questionnaire, and it ranged from 0= not important at all; 1= a little bit important; 2= quite important; 3= very important.

As Table 8 shows, the highest score (57.3) is for those participants who regard English as *very important*. The second highest percentage (30.8) is for those students who consider this language *quite important*. There are only three respondents (1.3) who do not see English as an important language. From these outcomes, it is suggested that for respondents, English is a very important language, even for those who do not like studying it.

The third question dealing with the attitudes of the participants towards the English language asked for the advantages of knowing and using English in different daily life situations. A four-point Likert scale was given

to respondents so that they could express their degree of agreement with the statements presented. This scale ranged from *total disagreement* to *total agreement*. Table 9 summarises the results obtained in this section.

In the case of the first statement, *I can cope better with ICT if I know English*, the findings reveal that most of the students *agree* with it. Knowing and using English is regarded by 80.2% (44.5 and 35.7) of the participants as something necessary or, at least, useful when working with ICT, as shown in Table 9.

The second statement asserted that *You need English if you want to study at higher education level*, and the outcomes reveal that the highest score, 64.5 of participants express *total agreement* with the statement. English is really considered a must when you study at high levels (see Table 9).

The third statement said *You need English if you want to get a good job*, and the answers report that most of the participants (71.9 and 18.4) agree with this

**Table 8.** Importance of English for participants

Is English important?	Percentage	Frequency	N
Not at all	1.3	3	
A little bit	10.6	24	
Quite	30.8	70	
Very	57.3	130	
Mean			1453.3
S.D.			21961
Total N			227

**Table 9.** Advantages of knowing English in daily life situations in terms of percentages

	Total disagreement	Disagreement	Agreement	Total agreement	Total
To cope better with ICT	6.2	13.7	44.5	35.7	227
To study at higher education	4.4	2.6	28.5	64.5	229
To get a good job	4.8	4.8	18.4	71.9	228
To read books in original version	6.2	8.4	39.1	46.2	227
To understand songs and films	4.4	5.7	26.8	63.2	228
To communicate when travelling to foreign countries	4.8	1.3	16.3	77.5	227
To know better other countries and cultures	4.8	6.2	32.6	56.4	227

statement (see Table 9). English is strongly associated with good jobs. For some positions, English is a requirement, especially those related to the tourist industry such as tour guides, hotel receptionists, waiters and waitresses, among others. In addition, for other posts, even though it is also an optional requirement, it is desirable, as it may make a difference when competing for a position. For example, in exams to get a permanent position for the state administration as a civil servant, the final exam, which is usually optional, is frequently an English test. This exam may provide the candidate with an extra mark to help achieve the position.

The fourth statement relates to English as *a motivation for reading books in original version*, and the findings show that the highest percentage is for those participants who *agree* (39.1) or *totally agree* (46.2) with this statement, which make a total of 85.3 of respondents, as Table 9 shows. The respondents are aware of the advantage of knowing English to read a book written in the language of Shakespeare, rather than a translation of the original book.

The following statements deal with different daily life activities that could be easy to carry out if you master English. The first one stated if you know English, *you can understand songs and films*, and the highest scores are for those participants who *totally agree* (63.2) or *agree* (26.8) with this sentence. Understanding lyrics of songs and films seem to be important motivations to learn English for 90% of the respondents (see Table 9). The next one asserted was if you know English, *you can communicate when you travel to foreign countries*, and the figures once more show that the majority of the participants (93.8 = 77.5 are in *total agreement* and 16.3 are in *agreement*) consider knowing and using English as an important motivation in order to communicate and being able to understand and make themselves understood when they travel to other foreign countries (see Table 9). The last statement of this section declared that if you know English, *you can get to know other countries and cultures better*. The findings represent the positive attitude of the participants, as the highest percentage is for those respondents who *totally agree* with the statement (56.4), followed by 32.6 of students who also *agree* with it.

After having carried out this analysis of the results obtained in this third section of the research, which focuses mainly on the attitudes of Spanish young students, the

participants seem to show a certain degree of awareness of the role of English as the main international language, and the importance of mastering this language.

### **Participants' self-evaluation of their level of proficiency in English**

The last section of the questionnaire dealt with the self-assessment the participants made of their own level of proficiency in English considering the four main language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). At this point, it is important to highlight that even if these responses may not be taken at face value, as students may not be very accurate when assessing their own proficiency in English, it is true that this section of the survey provides useful data about the level of proficiency students feel they have in English. This data help to have an 'ecography' of the perceptions of students towards their own level of English. Consequently, educational measures to improve the weaknesses students feel they have can be taken.

Table 10 shows the results obtained in the four different skills. With regard to the *speaking skill*, the findings reveal that the highest score (57.4) is for those students who consider their speaking skill to be *good*. There is also a percentage of 15.7% of respondents who regard their speaking ability to be *very good*. It means that despite the fact that around 30% of the participants consider that their speaking skill in English is quite low, there is a higher number of participants who regard their level as *proficient* or *acceptable*.

The next analysed item was the participants' *listening capacity* in English. The highest percentage (55.8) is once more for those participants who regard their listening skill as *good*. However, the second highest percentage (21.9) is for the respondents who chose *very good* as their actual level when listening or understanding English. The options *poor* and *very poor* were chosen by lower percentages of students, as presented in Table 10.

The ability to *write* in English was the next one, and the findings state that once more the highest scores are for those participants who chose *good* (55), and *very good* (24.8). It means that most of the students regard their capacity to write in English quite acceptable (see Table 10).

**Table 10.** Participants' level of proficiency in English in terms of percentages

	<b>Very poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Very good</b>	<b>Total</b>
Speaking	4.5	22.4	57.4	15.7	223
Listening	4	18.3	55.8	21.9	224
Writing	4.1	16.2	55	24.8	222
Reading	5.4	14.9	56.3	23.4	222

The last skill to be examined was *reading* in English, and the results (see Table 10) assert that most of the respondents regard their reading skill as *good* (56.3) or *very good* (23.4). By contrast, the lowest percentages are for the options *poor* (14.9) or *very poor* (5.4).

On view of these results, the students under study assess their four language skills (reading, writing speaking and listening) in a positive way, as the option of *good* is the most chosen one in the four different skills. However, the capacity to *speak* in English is the worst one assessed, since the option of *poor* is the second most chosen one by the participants.

## Conclusions and discussion

This small scale study sheds light on the impact of English on Spanish young students. Spanish young people are exposed to Anglo-American influences through the media, education and daily life, as shown in this piece of research.

This study researches the opportunities the participants have to be in contact with English, firstly, through the media. The figures show that listening to music in English (80.5 of participants do it around *once week*) and the activity of understanding what the lyrics say (59.3 of respondents also practise this around *once a week*) are the main sources of contact through the media.

The contact with English of the participants outside school reveals that CDs, music downloads, books, computers and television are the most important sources for the participants to be in contact with English, since around 70% of participants are exposed to this language *sometimes, often or very often*.

It means that the contact is still limited, and it is produced mainly through music. In any case, and given the fact that English is the *lingua franca* in this globalised world, it may be considered that the exposure to English gradually increases.

As far as the attitudes of the participants towards English is concerned, the three researched indicators; likeability, importance of English and advantages of knowing English, prove very accepted by the participants. Most of the respondents like English (46.3 *like it quite a lot* and 27.9 *like it*). Most respondents consider English *very important* (57.3) or *quite important* (30.8) and when it comes to the advantages of knowing English, most students *agree* or *totally agree* with the importance of knowing English for a number of reasons: to cope with ICT, for higher education, to get a good job, to read books in original version, to understand songs and films, to be able to communicate when travelling abroad and to know better other cultures and countries.

As regards the levels of proficiency in English of parents and siblings, the participants assert that their brothers and sisters have a higher level of proficiency than their own parents. It means that the youngest generations seem

to master English better than older people. Different explanations may help understand this fact; first, the ‘efforts’ of Spanish authorities to improve levels of proficiency in Spain is giving results. Second, the increasing exposure to the Anglo-American influence of Spanish young generations as a result of globalisation and interconnectedness. In this sense, the media and the Internet play a crucial role.

To sum up, the study reveals two facts: first, the respondents have a limited exposure to English outside the classroom, except for music and the Internet, which are the main sources of contact with this language. Second, the attitudes of participants towards English are very positive, since young respondents like English, consider it important, and they are also aware of the advantages of knowing English for many daily life matters. Other studies carried out in Spain (Lasagabaster, 2003, p. 479) point out the relevance and instrumental value which is associated with English, which is supported by positive attitudes of the participants in this study.

Related to levels of proficiency in English, the results may be considered positive in general terms, but as mentioned above, these outcomes cannot be taken at face value. By contrast, according to EU Special Eurobarometer (2006, p. 10), Spain is among those European countries whose language skills are ‘more moderate’ than in others with only 17% of speakers who master other languages different from the native tongue, mostly English. The same source states that 56% of Spanish population does not know any foreign language (Eurobarometer, 2006, p. 10). Therefore, more and deeper research which involves teachers could provide a more faithful ‘ecography’ of the real proficiency of students. The real situation of Spain in terms of knowledge of English might be changing, and it could be neither so negative as the Eurobarometer research carried out in 2006 shows, nor so positive as the young participants claim in this study of 2011.

In any case, this fact leads to reflect upon some more issues: How is it possible that after having studied English since they were three years old, most Spanish students find it difficult to hold a fluent conversation in English when they have finished their university degree? In other words, a Spanish student who have spent around 20 years studying this language in the educational system obtains poor results in communicative terms. Does the educational system consider the oral skills in English important enough? Around 26.9% of the respondents in this research regard their speaking ability *poor* or *very poor*, being the worst assessed skill. Probably, to overcome this weakness, more emphasis on the development of the oral skills in English should be put by practitioners.

Some more questions related to the level of proficiency in English in Spain need to be asked: is the CLIL programme working properly in Spanish state education? Are Spanish universities being too flexible with the levels of proficiency of their students in English? It is important

to bear in mind that, once they finish, university students will have to work in a globalised world, probably for an international company or they will even decide to go abroad to work. In these cases, English is not an option but an obligation. Should the educational system (from primary to higher education) be more demanding with the levels students should have after they finish each grade? Is this *poor* level of English limiting the opportunities of young Spaniards in terms of employment not only abroad but also in Spain?

All these questions remain to think over and question whether the efforts carried out by the authorities in Spain are being effective enough or whether these efforts should be even greater. On the light of the results presented in this paper, educational authorities and practitioners in Spain should consider the idea of questioning the current language policies when it comes to teaching English in this country. The problem could lie in the traditional tendency of Spanish teachers to focus on grammatical contents and written skills rather than in the development of the oral and listening skills among students. Personally, as a student in primary and secondary education, I was never exposed to any oral or listening activity or even any class where the teacher spoke in English. English classes used to be in Spanish. Obviously, as I finished secondary education, my written and reading skills were quite acceptable, but my communicative competencies were rather limited.

However, this situation may change, and it is currently changing. A possible solution could be the implementation of more communicative and oral approaches in English classes, rather than just focusing on the development of grammar and writing skills. This could contribute to address that lack of contact of Spanish students with English outside the English classroom. In addition, Spanish teachers need to teach their classes in English and be aware of the importance of making students feel self-confident when they intend to communicate in English. Spanish practitioners should not imitate the models they received as students of English some decades ago.

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