

11. Language transfer, interference, or simple translation



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Abstract

This study aims to investigate whether intermediate and advanced english students in a mexican university context can distinguish elements of interlingual vocabulary, specifically cognates and false cognates. A 30-item instrument was designed and administered to a sample of 82 participants at a mexican public university. The 82 participants were from two different instructional levels to make a comparison. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the lexical recognition of cognates and false cognates. Students at level seven demonstrated a lexical advantage over students at level five. Although there was some confusion with several false cognates, students from both levels could identify these interlingual elements.

Keywords: *cognates, false cognates, vocabulary, recognition, translation.*

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Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es investigar si los estudiantes intermedios y avanzados de inglés en un contexto universitario mexicano pueden distinguir elementos de vocabulario interlingüístico, específicamente cognados y falsos cognados. Se diseñó un instrumento de 30 ítems y se administró a una muestra de 82 participantes en una universidad pública mexicana. Los 82 participantes pertenecían a dos niveles de instrucción diferentes para hacer una comparación. Los resultados arrojaron que existe una diferencia estadísticamente significativa entre los dos grupos en el reconocimiento léxico de cognados y falsos cognados. Los estudiantes del nivel siete mostraron tener una ventaja léxica sobre los estudiantes del nivel cinco. Aunque hubo cierto nivel de confusión respecto a algunos falsos cognados. Los estudiantes de ambos niveles pudieron identificar estos elementos interlingüísticos.

Palabras clave: *cognados, falsos cognados, vocabulario, reconocimiento, traducción.*

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude est de déterminer si les apprenants d'anglais intermédiaires et avancés dans un contexte universitaire mexicain peuvent distinguer les éléments du vocabulaire interlingue, en particulier les cognats et les faux cognats. Un instrument de 30 items a été conçu et administré à un échantillon de 82 participants dans une université publique mexicaine. Les 82 participants appartenaient à deux niveaux d'éducation différents pour effectuer une comparaison. Les résultats ont montré qu'il existe une différence statistiquement significative entre les deux groupes dans la reconnaissance lexicale des cognats et des faux cognats. Il a été démontré que les étudiants du niveau sept avaient un avantage lexical par rapport aux étudiants du niveau cinq. Même s'il y avait un certain niveau de confusion avec certains faux apparentés, les élèves des deux niveaux ont pu identifier ces éléments interlingues.

Mots-clés : *cognats, faux cognats, vocabulaire, reconnaissance, traduction.*

Language transfer, interference, or simple translation

The importance of a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has grown in the past fifty years thanks to the teachers' demands to know what is happening inside the language classroom. A very important aspect of SLA is the study of Language Transfer (LT) which, thanks to Krashen and other renowned linguists, has become an essential factor in studying how learners learn a language. The literature on language transfer has shown to provide interesting implications that are relevant in several fields including psycholinguistics, linguistics, syntax, and other disciplines. Understanding the effects that language transfer has on language learners may provide tools for teachers and researchers that can aid in the process of learning a second language. Whether these effects are positive or negative, the teaching community, in general, should be aware of the impact that a native language has on students and perhaps view language transfer as an opportunity to improve language skills.

One of these pivotal skills is vocabulary, and although there is sufficient research on vocabulary development, there seems to be limited research on the topic of *cognates* and *false cognates* and how they may present conflict in second-language vocabulary development for Spanish-speaking learners. In addition, most ESL/EFL books do not cover this type of vocabulary, causing the English Language Learners (ELLs) to use these items inaccurately, if resourceful, or not use them at all. For this reason, it is essential to promote teaching cognates as an important part of English vocabulary. ESL/EFL teachers need to be informed about research and studies that provide insights, strategies, and/or information on these complex cross-linguistic items. The objective of this study is to find out whether intermediate and advanced EFL students can identify between cognates and false cognates and if the participants' performance differs according to their level.

Literature review

It is very common to have ESL/EFL students who are confident in their language use to produce words or utterances that are grammatically and syn-

tactically correct but whose meaning makes it inappropriate for the context where these words are utilized. It is also very common for some teachers to overlook these errors, perhaps to motivate the students to “just speak” without paying attention to mistakes, or maybe the instructor is not well-versed in this type of mistake. An example of this is shown in the following dialogue which takes place in a 7th grade english class in a mexican bilingual school:

Student: teacher, teacher (crying)

Teacher: Hey Juliet, why are you crying, c'mon, there, there.

Student: I'm crying because Cynthia is *molesting me...

Teacher: Oh, is she bothering you? Don't cry. I'm going to talk to her.

Student: Ok, thank you, teacher, (sobbing).

As it can be observed, the student is using a type of word called 'false cognate' (marked with an *) which makes it inappropriate for the context. This might be because *molest* (*v*) and *molestar* (*v*) are words that sound very similar in english and spanish, but they have a completely different meaning; in english, it has a sexual connotation and in spanish, it simply means to bother someone. Errors as such can be considered an example of language transfer and it is important to use them appropriately.

Language transfer can be defined in different ways according to different perspectives. From a psycholinguistic perspective, it is seen as the appearance of temporary but systematic structural influence from one language to another thanks to habit as argued by Paradis and Navarro (2003). From a linguistic view, Guo (2018) revisits the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, which proposes that “L2 language competency is partly a function of well-developed L1 language competency” (p. 212). It also proposes that L1 language skills influence L2 language skills, i.e., language skills in one language will transfer to another language if there is sufficient exposure to the L2 and there is a strong motivation to learn the language. In recent years, scholars have also interpreted the role of L1 transfer not only as a complex mental operation but also as part of a repertoire of strategies L2 learners use in the course of L2 acquisition. Language transfer has been seen as a learner driven process similar to any other processes involved in language acquisition (Karim & Nassaji, 2013).

Another definition suggests that in second-language acquisition, the tendency to transfer the phonology, syntax, and semantics of the native language into the learning of the second language is considered language transfer (Murphy, 2003).

The three previous definitions have something in common; they discuss the overlapping of L1 over L2. Yet, for practical purposes, this chapter focuses on the definition proposed by Richards (2015) “transfer is the effect of one language on the learning of another”. (p. 273) When two languages share a linguistic feature or have the same form, it is considered positive language transfer. In other words, L1 and L2 may have similar grammatical aspects, word order, homophones, and other features that might be reflected in the process of second language learning. For instance, in English and Spanish noun phrases have definite articles which might be helpful for a Spanish-speaking ELL to understand the use of these determiners in English (Odlin, 2005). Compare:

- la puerta - the door
- el perro - the dog
- la escuela - the school

As opposed to Russian, Korean, Chinese and other languages, which do not use a definite article.

On the other hand, negative transfer, also known as interference, is “the use of an L1 pattern or rule that leads to an error or inappropriate form in the target language”. (Richards, 2015, p. 273) For instance, the absence of auxiliary verbs in Spanish to form interrogatives or negatives may lead ELLs to produce sentences such as

- ‘*Where you live?*’ instead of ‘Where do you live?’
- ‘*I no understand*’ instead of ‘I don’t understand.’

In Spanish, it is only necessary to use intonation to make questions, and to add the word *no* to make negatives (Eldredge & Mayea, 2016) and this might be the cause of these types of errors, which in time might become fossilized (Han, 2004).

According to August et al. (2005) a common feature of negative transfer is the incorrect use of cognates and false cognates. Cognates are defined as words in different languages that are of a common historical origin (Whitley, 2002). False cognates, on the other hand, are defined “as an L1 word that is formally similar to an L2 word [...] but whose meanings are different” (Roca Varela, 2015, pp. 32-34). Both cognates and false cognates (also known as false friends) are often similar in pronunciation and spelling but not in meaning. Spanish and English share a large number of cognates, especially low-frequency English words (Proctor and Mo, 2009).

As Agustín (2010) defines “learners whose L1 is typologically related to the target language tend to resort more frequently to their L1 for transfer purposes” (p. 52). Some of the positive effects of language transfer can be summarized as follows:

1. awareness of Spanish-English cognates can facilitate reading,
2. cognate awareness may facilitate early literacy instruction,
3. it is a transferable skill,
4. language transfer can be used as a communication strategy,
5. it has shown to be of help in tests/exams.

The first effect, awareness of Spanish-English cognates can facilitate reading. When English learners can relate words with a related function and meaning, it may be of help in order to read more fluently and to have a better comprehension of the reading “Knowledge of the cognate relationships that exist between Spanish and English is an example of positive transfer which facilitates English reading comprehension” (August et al., 2005, p. 52).

The second effect, cognate awareness may facilitate early literacy instruction. In a study that analyzed young emergent bilinguals’ cognate and false cognate knowledge and vocabulary outcomes on four assessments in English and Spanish. The findings revealed that children were capable of using shared phonology of words to recognize and produce cognates. Additionally, children were not confused by the similar phonology, in semantically different words when recognizing and producing false cognates. This indicates “that children who are just beginning to acquire literacy may also

possess a bilingual advantage when identifying cognate items as do their older peers” (Simpson et al., 2016, p. 448)

The third effect, it is a transferable skill. It is suggested that ELLs who have a cognate advantage in the spoken domain reflect skill acquisition in the written domain. Kelley and Kohnert (2012) propose the following: Metalinguistic skill, including phonological awareness, is both a vehicle and an outcome of early literacy instruction and could be reflected on spoken cognate vocabulary measures. It is also the case that spoken language skill is a positive predictor of literacy outcomes, so links between spoken and written language are bidirectional.

Next, language transfer can be used as a communication strategy. Language learners may rely on their L1 for communication purposes when their vocabulary is limited as suggested by Kelley and Kohnert (2012) whose study shows that some Spanish speaking ELL students use certain characteristics from their mother tongue to aid their lexical-semantic comprehension and production in their target language.

Finally, language transfer has been shown to be of help in tests. One particular study carried out with children learning English as a second language showed that bilingual children have a cognate phonological to lexical advantage in comparison with monolingual children. It also showed that this advantage can be used to figure out the meaning of rarely used words when they are cognates (Kelley and Kohnert, 2012).

A low but steady increase in the number of research studies on cognates has suggested that cognate knowledge facilitates English vocabulary and reading development in Spanish-speaking ELLs: “Knowledge of the cognate relationships that exist between Spanish and English are examples of positive transfer which facilitates English reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition” (August et al., 2015, p. 52). In a study conducted by (Bravo et al., 2007) with high school science materials in the United States, it was found that over 70% of the most important science vocabulary was English-Spanish cognates. In 2011, Dressler et al. discovered that Spanish-speaking ELLs were capable of recognizing cognate root words in English-derived words when they were asked to infer the meaning of these words in passage reading.

Cognate recognition is an ability that bilingual Spanish-English students and EFL students should be taught to improve skills such as spelling, reading,

and writing. In a study completed by Garcia et al. (2020) fourth graders were instructed in the use of cognates, the results showed that cognate instruction facilitated english reading comprehension as well as improving their knowledge in content areas.

Schwartz et al. (2007) carried out a study with english-spanish bilinguals that consisted in naming visually presented words aloud in each language. The words included cognates (e.g., fruit-fruta) and non-cognate translations (e.g., pencil-lápiz). The cognates were chosen in a way that the orthographic and phonological similarity of their lexical form in each language varied orthogonally. The results showed that cognate naming was influenced by the cross-language match of the orthographic and phonological codes (p. 114).

Jared and Szucs (2002) reported further evidence of cross-language interaction, especially in phonology, in a study in which bilinguals named words in both L1 and L2. The english words included heterophonic homographs of french words (e.g., pain meaning “bread”) and unambiguous controls (e.g., perch). The results provide support for the claim that bilinguals “simultaneously activate phonological codes from both of their languages, even when reading in their more dominant language” (p. 110).

Although it seems that bilingual students are indeed capable of recognizing cognates and that they help them read better, there is still a question concerning the ability of non-bilingual students of EFL. Therefore, based on the findings of the studies consulted and the undocumented observation of EFL students, it was expected that the present research would define if intermediate and advanced students of EFL were able to recognize cognates and false cognates. For that matter, this study is guided by the following research question:

1. Are ELLs from a particular language setting in northern Mexico able to distinguish cognates from false cognates?
2. Do advanced ELLs from a particular setting in northern Mexico have a lexical advantage over intermediate ELLs in recognizing false cognates?

Method

To try to answer the research questions, it was necessary to design research that could, partially or completely, provide an answer. This study is presented including a methods section, results, and a discussion. A crucial part of this research was selecting from who and where data could be obtained. Universidad de Sonora, in northern Mexico, has a large population of EFL students in its Department of Foreign Languages. This seemed appropriate for the development of this study since Spanish-speaking EFL learners were indispensable for data collection. The head of the Department of Foreign Languages from Universidad de Sonora provided an authorization letter to collect the data. The next step was contacting teachers whose classes could be used for the study. One of the instructors offered her level 5 and level 7 classes; four groups in total (two from level 5 and two from level 7).

Participants

82 students enrolled in the EFL courses of Universidad de Sonora participated in the study, 51 females and 31 males. 41 students belonged to level 5 and 41 belonged to level 7. All of them are Mexican and their L1 is Spanish. Their mean age is 19 for level 5 and 22 for level 7. These students have had different exposure to the English language, i.e. the mean of the number of years studying English is 3 for the intermediate level and 4.5 for the advanced one. Additionally, 25 of these students have taken EFL courses in local private institutions besides their mandatory university requirements. All of them have taken EFL in high school for three years, which is the total of years that this level of education mandates. See Table 1.

Table 1. *Students' Information*

Level	n	Age mean	Years of English study mean
Level 5	41	19	3
Level 7	41	22	4.5

Source: own elaboration.

Materials

Trying to find an instrument that could measure the construct of this study was not an easy task. Therefore, an instrument that could measure cognate knowledge was designed. A 30 item vocabulary task was the final product. The task consists of 30 short passages with a gap-filling section. This section is completed using one of the three choices labelled a, b or c. The statements reflect a context in which one of the choices provided should be used. These choices correspond to cognates, false cognates, and non-cognate words. The words utilized in the answers are lexical words: verbs, nouns, and adjectives. This instrument takes approximately 30 to 45 minutes to be completed. The instructions are written in english at level 4 of reading, according to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. Three bilingual EFL teachers, from Universidad de Sonora, revised the instrument for error or consistency problems. Minimal changes were suggested in terms of context and grammar. An internal consistency reliability test was carried out. The results indicated internal consistency at a cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha=.777$ which is considered acceptable according to field "the generally accepted value of .8 is appropriate for cognitive tests such as intelligence tests, for ability tests a cut-off point of .7 is more suitable" (p. 880). Additionally, an analysis of the Cronbach's Alpha values if item deleted, did not show particularly significant change in any of the items. See Appendix A for instrument.

Procedure

Once permission from the head of the department and the instructor was obtained, a date to administer was set. Students were informed that they were going to be given a vocabulary task, and they were also informed that it was their choice to come to class or not on the day of the administration. On the day of the administration of the task, the students were told one more time that it was optional to stay or leave the classroom. All the instructions were spoken in english and spanish. In addition, if they felt they did not want to continue with the test, they might do so. A total of 82 vocabulary

tasks were administered and 0% of the takers lasted over 35 minutes to complete them. After the administration, the tests were counted and grouped by levels, 41 for level 5 and 41 for level 7.

Data analysis

All the vocabulary tests were individually revised. A total score was obtained for every one of them by adding all the correct answers. A student could get a maximum of 30 points. The cut score to consider the test acceptable was 15 points. The scores from students from level 5 and level 7 were entered into Microsoft Excel to proceed with the analysis. Descriptive statistics, a t-test, and Correlation analysis were run on the scores.

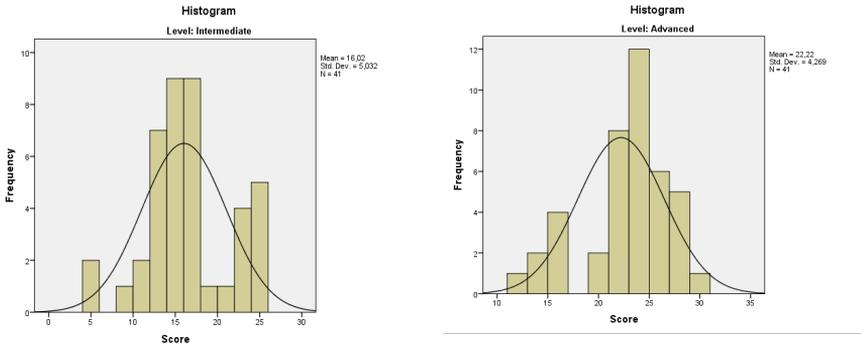
Results

41 students from level 5 (intermediate) completed the vocabulary task. The mean was $m=16.02$, and SD of 5.03. Skewness and Kurtosis showed values of 0.111 and 0.009, respectively. Z values were 0.30 and 0.01, which are all below the criteria of ± 3.29 indicating a distribution close to normal (Fields, 2013, p. 136). A visual inspection of the histogram also indicates a close-to-normal distribution of the scores.

41 students from level 7 (advanced) completed the vocabulary task. The mean was $m=22.22$, and SD of 4.26. Skewness and Kurtosis showed values of -0.911 and 0.26, respectively. Z values were 2.46 and 0.359, which are all below the criteria of ± 3.29 indicating a distribution close to normal (Fields 136). A visual inspection of the histogram also indicates a close-to-normal distribution of the scores.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D	Skewness	Kurtosis
Level 5	41	5	25	16.02	5.032	0.111	0.009
Level 7	41	12	29	22.22	4.269	-0.911	0.26



Source: own elaboration.

Four assumptions were checked. First assumption, the dependent variables were measured on a continuous scale. Second assumption, the independent variable consisted of two categories: intermediate and advanced. Third assumption, there were no outliers as indicated in the histograms. Finally, the fourth assumption, the distribution of the differences in the dependent variable was approximately normal. Both variables, intermediate and advanced, met the set of assumptions guaranteeing the use of parametric statistics, in this case an independent samples T-test.

An independent samples T-test was conducted to compare the scores of the intermediate and the advanced groups. There was a significant difference between the intermediate group ($M=16.02$, $SD=5.032$) and the advanced group ($M=22.22$, $SD=4.26$); $t(80) = -6.011$, $p=.000$. Refer to Table 3.

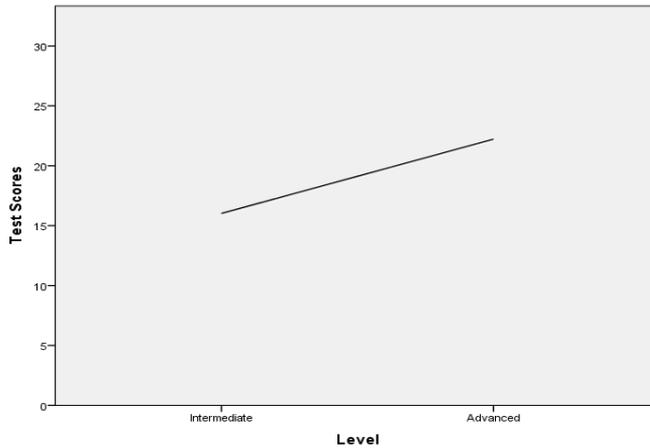
Table 3. T-test

F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
0.755	0.388	-6.011	80	0	-6.195	1.031

Source: own elaboration.

As it can be observed in the following plot, there is a difference in scores between the two groups (advanced and intermediate). The mean for the intermediate group was $m=16$ and the advanced group was $m=22.22$.

Figure 2. Plot of Mean Scores T-test



$t(80) = -6.01, p = .000$

Source: own elaboration.

To determine the correlation between the two tests, a Pearson correlation was conducted. With a value of $r = .558, p = .001$, this means a positive, significant correlation between the intermediate and the advanced groups. In terms of the correlation between the intermediate and the advanced groups, there is a small, positive relationship among them.

Table 4. Correlations

		Score	Level
Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.558**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0
	N	82	82
Level	Pearson Correlation	.558**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	
	N	82	82

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: own elaboration.

Discusson

Table 2 shows the general results of the instruments from levels 5 and 7. On a first glimpse, it can be observed that the means (16.02 and 22.22) suggest that the students have some knowledge of cognate recognition. Even though there were some scores as low as 5 points in level 5, the majority of the students obtained scores of above 50%. For level 7 students, the majority of the students obtained a score of above 73%. The results of the T-test ($t(80) = -6.01, p=.000$) indicate that there is a statistical difference between level 5 and level 7. The values obtained with correlation ($r=.558, p=.001$) indicate a positive relationship between the scores. This information helped to answer the research question: there *is* a lexical advantage in students of level 7 over students of level 5 in recognizing cross-linguistic items. Although it may seem obvious that students from higher levels have a knowledge advantage over students of inferior levels, it was necessary for the purpose of this study to actually find out the statistical difference between the two groups. This information may also change the general assumption of the EFL from the institution that EFL students do not recognize cognates and false cognates.

Conclusion

This study analyzed if spanish-speaking EFL learners from a mexican university were capable of differentiating between cognates and false cognates. The results indicated that indeed, there is a lexical advantage in students from level 7 over students from level 5. It was the general belief of EFL teachers at Universidad de Sonora that neither intermediate nor advanced students of english were able to recognize cross-linguistic items and that L1 played an important role in the students' use or misuse of the cognates. It was clear, after the results were analyzed, that the students could recognize cognates even though they had not received formal instruction on the topic.

A limitation of this research is that to make a larger claim such as in regards to the number of people that can identify cognates, a larger sample

needs to be considered. In addition, the students in either levels 5 and 7, have had different exposure to L2 and this could be a determining factor in the instrument results. Another limitation of this study was to find literature on the subject. Most of the references found are more related to the effects of bilingualism (english and other languages, but not spanish), or the research found was dated.

As mentioned earlier in this study, most language curricula from general english courses do not contemplate the instruction of cognates or false cognates; it is a matter of personal choice of the instructor to teach this important part of english vocabulary. A possible implication for this study is to identify whether EFL instructors in general have the necessary knowledge on the topic to be able to teach it and perhaps, propose some type of training for those who do not feel comfortable in the topic. Additionally, a possible area of future research is to find out those core cognates that are essential for hispanic ELLs in the development of their vocabulary repertoire. All in all, the study of cognates is fundamental for EFL learners to increase their vocabulary and be able to use these words effectively in different contexts.

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Appendix A

Instrument

The following is a vocabulary exercise, which intends to measure your ability to recognize cognates and false cognates. The results of this test are intended for research purposes only and will NOT affect your grade in your current english course. This exercise contains 30 questions in two pages.

Instructions. Read the following passages and select ONE of the options that best completes each situation.

1. I just saw Maggie on the street but she didn't _____ me.
a. study b. greet c. salute
2. Sorry I couldn't come to you party but I had a previous _____.
a. compromise b. appointment c. drink
3. I have all my friends' phone numbers and addresses in my _____.
a. stereo b. agenda c. phone book
4. Do you by _____ happen to have change for a \$20?
a. chance b. memory c. casualty

5. My sister really likes music; she plays the _____ in a band.
a. cash b. battery c. drums
6. This is a _____ event and you need to wear a suit and tie.
a. formal b. cold c. forgotten
7. The _____ President of Mexico is E. Peña Nieto from until 2018.
a. golden b. actual c. current
8. It's important that these _____ are put in the album to preserve them.
a. monkeys b. cell phones c. photographs
9. My brother is studying dentistry. He is in the _____ of Medicine.
a. faculty b. school c. house
10. Are you going to put these flowers in your new _____?
a. trash b. box c. vase
11. His face looks _____. Do I know him?
a. adequate b. unknown c. familiar
12. I really like painting, sculpture, and designing. I would like to be an _____.
a. artist b. electrician c. anthropologist
13. In two months my co-workers and I are moving to the new _____ to work in a larger space.
a. cemetery b. facility c. Spain
14. I bought this new car because the car dealer gave me many _____ including a low payment.
a. facilities b. perks c. letters

15. Do you have any _____ on fruits and vegetables?
a. money b. promotions c. specials
16. A: What do you need for the beach?
B: I need my sunglasses, a towel, and a pair of _____.
a. Sunblock b. sandals c. dogs
17. _____ me, can you tell me where the restrooms are?
a. Forget b. Sorry c. Excuse
18. The phone is ringing! Somebody _____ it.
a. break b. answer c. contest
19. Mr. Lopez is the school's new _____. Finally, we have new administration!
a. principal b. clown c. student
20. My youngest brother, who is 7, goes to a private _____ because he has a scholarship.
a. college b. school c. church
21. You shouldn't waste so much water when you wash your car. You only need one _____.
a. water b. bucket c. bald
22. Cecilia is my best friend. I really _____ her.
a. estimate b. love c. hate
23. When we saw the robbery, we called the _____ but they never came.
a. firefighters b. police c. policy
24. The Senate of the Republic is filled with _____ from many states.
a. politics b. children c. politicians

25. Linda just _____ her car because she didn't stop at the red light.
a. choked b. pushed c. crashed
26. You need to _____ this check before you can cash it.
a. sign b. firm c. color
27. What kind of _____ do you want? We have ice cream, pie, and cake.
a. sugar b. dessert c. appetizer
28. These cookies are delicious! I just need a _____ of milk.
a. glass b. box c. vase
29. This is the _____ procedure. We almost finish.
a. first b. final c. new
30. I'm going to be an uncle; my sister is _____.
a. Here b. embarrassed c. pregnant