

International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



Language Proficiency, Collocational Knowledge and the Role of L1 Transfer: A Correlational Study of Iranian EFL Learners

[PP: 141-148]

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the correlation between language proficiency, collocations and the role of L1 transfer with collocations. This is a quantitative research. The research places more emphases on collecting data in the form of numbers. It is also experimental research in the sense that it tests participants to measure their variables. The participants of the study were 57 Persian B.A students, both male and female from Islamic Azad University of Bandar Abbas, Iran. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between Iranian subjects' language proficiency, as measured by the Michigan proficiency test and their knowledge of collocations, as measured by their performance on a collocation test designed for the current study. The results obtained from the research indicate that Iranian EFL learners are more likely to use the right collocation in cases of L1 transfer. This suggests that positive transfer plays a major role when it comes to EFL learners' ability to produce the right collocations in their L2. The findings of this study have some implications for language teaching. Teachers can put emphasis on the inclusion of selected grammatical and lexical collocations in reading comprehension passages.

Keywords: *Collocational Knowledge, Language Proficiency, Positive Transfer, Negative Transfer, Iranian EFL Learners*

ARTICLE INFO	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
	19/08/2017	25/09/2017	17/12/2017

Suggested citation:

Hajebi, M. (2017). Language Proficiency, Collocational Knowledge and the Role of L1 Transfer: A Correlational Study of Iranian EFL Learners. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 5(4), 141-148.

1. Introduction

Collocation has become one of the big concerns in EFL teaching and learning for years. Many researchers have understood the effect of collocation and the need for collocation teaching in EFL courses (Brown, 1974; Natinger, 1980; Bahns& Eldaw,1983; Howarth, 1988). Collocation plays an important role in language acquisition, although very few systematic studies address this issue. Hatch and Brown (1995) found that L2 learners acquire those phrases or chunk language as a unit rather than as individual words of a phrase. Schmitt (2000) believed that compared to L1 users, who acquired their phrases or chunk language and developed the competence to reconstruct the language with phrases from exposure to the environment, L2 learners seemed to have the same ability to resort to the same strategies as L1 learners to learn chunk language. Ellis (1997) pointed out that it is possible for L2 learners to access native-speaker like competence if the learners are capable of using the idioms fluently.

Knowledge on how to combine words in collocations appropriately comes through fluency. Mistakenly combining a word with an inappropriate word may cause misunderstanding of meaning and produce unnatural utterances. Collocations can shorten the time necessary to produce expressions and also facilitate fluency (Fillmore1979, Shin2007, and Sung 2003).

The frequent use of collocations is generally by the fluent users of a native language as native speakers have access to thousands of words. They can understand and produce many sentences by using their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary; however, they have a tendency to put a large number of ready-made chunks of words together in different ways based on their situations. Words become a unit, because of repeated use of the same chunks by members of a language community. In some cases, a group of words together can link the words in one chunk in the mind of the users of a language (Namvar, 2012). To have native-like fluency, second language learners need to know that the ability to understand



and produce collocations as unanalyzed chunks is a significant part of language acquisition (Farrokh, 2013). Firth (1957, p.195) explained language in both linguistic and situational context "You shall know a word by the company it keeps". This means that where we find one of the collocating words we can expect to find the other. MacCarthy (1990) believed that collocation is a marriage contract between words, and this makes it an important organizing principle in the vocabulary of any language.

The goal of learning collocations is to be able to put a word to actual and appropriate use. To use a word appropriately, it is not enough to know just the meaning of a word; we need to pay attention to the immediate context that it is used in. Both lexical and grammatical patterns are important to ensure that this happens. Collocations enable EFL learners to know more about language chunks used by native speakers and improve their skills in speech and writing. The present study investigates the correlation between language proficiency and knowledge of collocations, as well as the role of L1 transfer with collocations.

2. Significance of Collocations in EFL Classrooms

Collocation is a challenging attribute of second language learning and as a vital element of communicative competence. A number of researchers (Cowie, 1981; Benson et. al, 1985; Lewis, 1997) have emphasized the value and significance of collocations for the development of second language word combinations and communicative competence. They all recommended teaching these ready-made chunks of the language to EFL learners to improve their performance. The aim of this section is to present the points of view of various researchers about the importance of studying collocation in different levels of language learning.

Benson et al (1985) believes that collocations are arbitrary and unpredictable. This makes it difficult for non-native speakers to cope with them. EFL learners mostly tend to learn the meaning and use of words individually but they don't pay attention to their collocation properties. Because of the arbitrary nature of collocations, researchers recommended the EFL teachers to motivate learners to learn collocations. In recent years, teachers and researchers have paid more attention to

collocations in language development and teaching methods especially for EFL learners. It is easier to memorize a new word in a network of associations; this means that language chunks help learners to store information. In this way, by learning collocations, they will focus on specific lexical limitations. For instance, if the language learners have some information about collocations like "a convenient situation" and "a convenient time" but not "a convenient person", they will automatically discover that the adjective "convenient" is just used with inanimate nouns Nattinger and DeCarrio (1992) refer to collocations as the very center of language acquisition, that improve speech, listening comprehension, reading and writing skills. Nation (2001, p.318) pointed out that some levels of correct use of collocation are important in regard to achieving native fluency, "all fluent and appropriate language requires collocation knowledge". Therefore, the significant role that collocations play in the native-like performance of EFL learners on the one hand and the problems that EFL learners face with collocations of different types on the other hand, highlights the fact that collocation should be taken into consideration from the first stages of learning. In addition, there are a great number of word combinations in English that show countless collocations and the mastery over them can strongly affect EFL learners' fluency and accuracy in writing and speaking.

Smith (2005) states there are some reasons that collocation should be involved in the curriculum. First, collocations are still problematic when non-native speakers try to select the correct combination of words even if they know the individual words. The need for learners to go beyond the intermediate plateau is the second reason. It is more motivating for upper level students. Most of the time, they can cope with using collocation but they try to avoid the more challenging tasks of advanced language learning. The third reason is that possessing knowledge of collocations improves the knowledge of vocabulary and helps fluency and decrease stress in communication. The last reason suggests that collocation errors are more harmful to the communication skills than the grammatical errors; because they result in producing unusual phrases or odd expressions.

3. Review of Related Literature

As one of the core theoretical components of this study is the construct of collocation, it is sensible to start with the most influential definitions that have been offered through the years. Collocation is a concept defined and comprehended in different ways (Bahns, 1993). Different linguists and researchers have set their own criterion to pursue their collocation studies. Generally speaking, there are three different claims about this term. The first claim argues that collocations deal with meaning, while the second does not regard collocation as a semantic relation between words. The third claim, which is the focus of this paper, is the structural approach that takes collocation to be determined by its structural patterns. According to this view lexis cannot be separated from grammar, because both are related aspects of one phenomenon (Bahns, 1993).

Firth (1957) claimed that the meaning of a word should be known by the company it keeps. To put it in other words, collocation is the meaning of a word and its relationship with other words (Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Hill, 2000). Most of the definitions used by Firth, who is the father of collocation research in modern times, are similar to those of ancient Greek scholars; it is generally accepted that Firth is the first linguist in modern times that goes through the notion of collocation and introduces it as a theory of meaning. Following Firth's point of view, Bolinger and Sears (1981) also argue that the ranges and diversity of collocations are vast. They explain collocation as "a kind of habitual association of words" and proved that collocations are the result of native speaker's experiences of the expressions, repeated again and again in given circumstances. Thus, based on the context, "good chance" and "strong likelihood" might be assumed as acceptable collocations while "strong chance" and "high likelihood" were unacceptable. In the words of Lewis (1997, p.44) "collocations are those combinations of words which occur naturally with greater than random frequency. Collocations co-occur, but not all words which co-occur, are collocations". Sinclair (1966) was another researcher who was very interested in generating lexical sets by the use of collocations and wrote a volume of papers in memory of Firth. McCarthy (1991) views the notion of collocation as a kind of cohesive device. According to his point of

view, collocation points to the probability that lexical items will co-occur, but there is not a semantic relationship between words. Thus, collocations offer other functions besides the meaning in the sentences. The notion of collocation is not raised creatively for the first time; people have a memory of having heard or seen these structures before and apply them as such.

Finally, Benson et al (1986b, p.23) proposed the following description of collocations: "collocations are loosely fixed arbitrary recurrent word combinations and the meaning of the whole does reflect the meaning of the parts. In addition, Benson (1989) argued that the linguistic treatment of collocations should take into account three typical criteria (as cited in Manning & Schutze, 1999). The first is Non-Compositionality. That is, the meaning of a collocation is not a straightforward composition of the meanings of its parts. Either the meaning is totally different from the free combinations or there is an added element of meaning that cannot be predicted from the parts.

3.1 Types of Collocations

Words are combined in different ways to make meaningful groups. So, it'll be difficult to clarify the notion of collocations. Among these word combinations, some are fixed and some are looser. To make the concept of collocation more understandable, it is necessary to have a distinction between idioms, collocations and other kinds of word combinations, though these combinations are very similar to each other (Bahns, 1993; Wu, 1996). Howarth (1993) distinguished word combinations by dividing them into four groups; the first group is "Free combinations"; interpreted from the literal meaning of individual elements, like "drink coffee" or "drink tea". The second group is "Restricted collocations", collocations that are more limited in the selection of compositional elements and usually have one component used in a specialized context, like "perform a task". The third group consists of "Figurative idioms" which have a metaphorical meaning as a whole that show its literal interpretation, like "do a U-turn". Finally, "Pure idioms" belongs to the forth group. A pure idiom is a single unit whose meaning is completely unpredictable from the meaning of its components, such as "blow the gaff". This idiom means "to cause trouble for someone by letting other people know something



that they were trying to keep secret". So, it is impossible to predict the correct meaning of the combination. As many different definitions of collocation have been provided, there should be many theories for classifying them as well.

Benson et al. (1986a) classified collocations into two main groups: grammatical collocations and lexical collocations. The first group is made by combination of a dominant open class word such as a noun, a verb or an adjective, plus a grammatical word like a preposition or grammatical structural pattern like a clause or an infinitive. The second group, on the other hand, only has different combinations of nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs. It involves clauses, infinitives or prepositions. According to Benson et al. (1986a), there are eight major kinds of grammatical collocations and seven kinds of lexical collocations.

3.1.1 Lexical Collocations Adopted from Benson et al. (1986a)

- Verb (donation creation or activation) + noun (pronoun or prep. phrase)
- Verb (meaning eradication or nullification) + noun
- Adjective + noun
- Noun + verb
- Noun + noun
- Adverb + adjective
- Verb + adverb

3.1.2 Grammatical collocations adopted from Benson et al. (1986a)

- Noun + preposition
- Noun + to-infinitive
- Noun + that-clause
- Preposition + noun
- Adjective + preposition
- Adjective + to-infinitive
- Adjective+ that-clause

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This is a quantitative research. This type of research places more emphases on collecting data in the form of numbers. The research design used is experimental correlational as it tests participants to measure their variables. In order to probe the research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is a relationship between language proficiency and the knowledge of collocation of second language learners.

H2: There is a relationship between L1 influence on the production of L2 collocation of second language learners.

Regarding the first research question, the researcher tried to find whether English proficiency affects the English language learners' performance in a collocation test. First, the proficiency of the subjects in English as their second language was measured. Next, it was correlated with the average score in the collocation test by the respondent. The final result showed how the two variables went together positively or negatively based on the raw scores in the Pearson correlation test. Regarding the second research question, the researcher measured the frequency of correct and incorrect use of collocations by the subjects in both lexical and grammatical types first. Then, the frequency of L1 influence on correct and incorrect collocations was noted.

4.2 Participants

Participants were 57 Persian B.A students (male and female) from Azad University of Bandar Abbas majoring in English language teaching. Their age ranged from 18 to 29 years. All of the participants spoke Persian as their native language and learnt English as a foreign language. A random sampling technique was used to choose the subjects with the purpose to make this research as representative as it could be since everyone shared similar chance to be a sample.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments and procedures

EFL learners' familiarity with collocations has been studied on both the productive level (Bonk 2000, Gitsaki 1999) and the receptive level (Gyllstad 2007, Keshavarz&Salimi 2007) by means of collocation tests. Gyllstad (2007) divides them into corpus-driven studies and experimental studies. The data collection in this study went through certain procedures. There was a coding procedure. To ensure participants' anonymity, identifying numbers were used instead of names. In order to conduct the research and to reduce unwanted error variance caused by fatigue, the data collection was carried out in two separate sessions.

First, all the students took the Michigan proficiency test to determine their level of English proficiency. This test comprised 35 items and was divided into four parts. The first three parts consisted of 10 multiple choice questions each to measure the grammar and vocabulary knowledge of the examinees. The last part included a

reading comprehension task with 5 multiple choice questions. For test scoring, there was no problem of inter-rater reliability since items were designed in objective formats. The possible range of scores was from 0 to 35. Correct answers scored one point and incorrect answers scored zero. Items unanswered were counted as incorrect. The higher a student's score, the more proficient s/he would be rated. Next, the students had to complete the Collocation test. This test consisted of 40 items in a multiple choice format. The combinations of "noun + noun" and "noun + verb" were chosen to be investigated from lexical collocations. From grammatical collocations, "preposition + noun" and "noun + preposition" were selected. There were 10 contexts in each combination section. The scores on the collocation test showed the participants' knowledge of collocations.

The data set based on four sections was scored as correct or incorrect because all items allowed for only one possible answer. The maximum score for answering 40 questions correctly was 40 points. The students got one point for each question done correctly. It is worth mentioning that before the administration of the above tests, the participants had some instructions about how to complete the test. In terms of timing, students were allowed to complete the Michigan proficiency test in 40 minutes and the collocation test in 60 minutes. Most of them were able to finish the tests before the allocated time, showing that the measures were correctly designed from a practical point of view.

5. Findings

5.1 Proportion of Positive and Negative Transfer in Collocation Test

Based on the collocation test, the expected proportion of positive and negative transfer in all four sub-types of collocations are as below. It is important to mention that 6 out of 10 items in Noun + Noun collocations were designed for positive transfer and 4 out of 10 for negative transfer. In Noun + Verb collocations, the proportion of positive and negative transfers were equal (5). In Noun + Preposition, the proportion of positive to negative transfer was 6 to 4 out of 10. 7 items out of 10 in Preposition + Noun were designed for positive transfer and 3 out of 10 for negative transfer.

Table 1: Proportion of Positive and Negative Transfer in Collocation Test

Collocation types	Positive transfer	Negative transfer	Other
Noun + Noun	6	4	10
Noun + Verb	5	5	10
Noun + Preposition	6	4	10
Preposition + Noun	7	3	10
Total	24	16	40

The collocation test consisted of 40 items in 4 sections in a multiple-choice format. Each section was based on one collocation sub-type with 10 questions. The number of Iranian EFL learners who have taken the collocation test was 60. Therefore there are 600 responses in each collocation sub-type.

Table 2: An Overview of Proportion of Context for Positive and Negative Transfer in Collocation Test

Collocation types	Positive transfer	Negative transfer	Other
Noun + Noun	360	240	600
Noun + Verb	360	300	600
Noun + Preposition	360	240	600
Preposition + Noun	420	180	600
Total	1440	960	2400

5.2 The Role of L1 Transfer in the Production of L2 Collocations

The second research question was about the influence of L1 transfer on the production of L2 collocations. Language transfer is an important cause of collocation errors. This language transfer refers to the influence on the L2 resulting from similarities or differences between the first language and any other learned or acquired language. In fact, transfer refers to the use of the learner's knowledge about their L1 in L2. There are two types of transfer: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer happens when a structure in the L1 is used in an L2 utterance and the result is target-like in the L2, while negative transfer occurs when a structure from the L1 is applied in an L2 utterance and the result is a non-target utterance (Oldin, 1989).

In order to determine whether the collocation was influenced by positive or negative transfer, first the number of correct and incorrect answers influenced by the L1 was surveyed. Then the number of correct and incorrect answers not influenced by the L1 was investigated. At last the proportion of positive and negative transfer were compared.

Table 3: Number of Correct Answers Involving and Not Involving L1 Transfer



Collocation Types	L 1 Transfer	No L1 Transfer	Total Number of Correct Answers
Noun + Noun	186 (64 %)	106 (36 %)	292
Noun + Verb	175 (72 %)	68 (28 %)	243
Noun + Preposition	171 (69 %)	76 (31 %)	247
Preposition + Noun	274 (84 %)	51 (16 %)	325
Total	806/1107 (73 %)	301/1107 (27 %)	1107

The Table shows that generally a high proportion of correct responses are the result of L1 transfer. This table also reveals that this difference is particularly big in Preposition + Noun collocations, where 274 (84 %) involve L1 transfer, while 51 (16 %) do not. Moreover, the result of L1 influence on correct collocations revealed that most of the correct Preposition + Noun collocations were influenced by L1. It means that L1 had a significant impact on producing correct Preposition + Noun collocations.

The smallest differences between correct collocations that are influenced by L1 and those that are not influenced by L1 are found with Noun + Noun collocations. In this type, the number of correct answers is close in both conditions.

Table 4: Number of Incorrect Answers Involving and Not Involving L1 Transfer

Collocation Types	L 1 Transfer	No L1 Transfer	Total Number Of Incorrect Answers
Noun + Noun	72 (23 %)	236 (77 %)	308
Noun + Verb	107 (30 %)	250 (70 %)	357
Noun + Preposition	89 (25 %)	64 (75 %)	353
Preposition + Noun	72 (26 %)	203 (74 %)	275
Total	340/1293 (26 %)	953/1293 (74 %)	1293

Table shows the total number/proportion of incorrect answers that are and are not the result of L1 transfer in the different collocation types. As we can see, 26% (340/1293) of incorrect responses can be explained as causes of negative transfer. The number of incorrect Noun + Preposition collocations not influenced by L1 is the highest (264) and the number of incorrect Preposition + Noun collocations is the lowest (203).

According to table, the total number of incorrect collocations with all four types influenced by L1 (340) is lower than the total number of incorrect collocations with all four types not influenced by L1 (953). It seems that the L1 does not have a leading and decisive role in creating

incorrect collocations in all above four types. The number of incorrect answers influenced by the L1 in Noun + Noun and Preposition + Noun collocations are equal, and thereafter the number of incorrect answers not influenced by the L1 in both types are very close.

Table 5: Proportions of Positive versus Negative Transfer and Collocation Sub-Types

Collocation Types	Positive Transfer (Mean Score)	Negative Transfer (Mean Score)
Noun + Noun	0.5041551	0.4602510
Noun + Verb	0.5833333	0.2233333
Noun + Preposition	0.4888889	0.3208333
Preposition + Noun	0.6404762	0.3111111

The information in the table reveals that the proportion of positive transfer (0.5041551 in Noun + Noun, 0.5833333 in Noun + Verb, 0.6404762 in Preposition + Noun, and 0.4888889 in Noun + Preposition) is higher than negative transfer (0.4602510 in Noun + Noun, 0.2233333 in Noun + Verb, 0.3111111 in Preposition + Noun, and 0.3208333 in Noun + Preposition) in all four types of collocations. This means that in most contexts, when EFL learners transfer from their mother tongue, the results were positive and lead to correct answers.

It is also worth noting that there is no significant difference between positive and negative transfer in Noun + Noun collocations. The mean scores for positive transfer (0.5041551) and negative transfer (0.4602510) are very close in Noun + Noun collocations. On the other hand, the difference is considerable on Preposition + Noun collocations. The mean score for positive transfer (0.6404762) is more than twice compared with negative transfer (0.3111111).

6. Discussion

According to the findings of this study, it is clear that learning individual words and their meaning is not enough to achieve good fluency in a second language. It is also necessary for EFL learners to know how words combine into chunks in their L2. If EFL learners do not learn how words are put together, they will not be able to approach a native-like level of proficiency. The two research questions addressed in this study intended to survey the relation between language proficiency and language transfer in the production of

collocations. According to the overall results of the data analysis, a positive relationship was found. This study has discussed certain issues in relation to collocations in English and Persian. The first issue was the correlation between language proficiency and collocation. The results of the current study indicate that knowledge of collocations can be considered an important factor when the general proficiency of EFL learners is determined. So, there is a significant relationship between Iranian subjects' language proficiency as measured by the Michigan proficiency test and their knowledge of collocations as measured by their performance on the collocation test. The results of previous studies reveal that the correlation between language proficiency and knowledge of collocation are inconsistent. Some researchers such as Faghih & Sharifi (2006); Keshavarz & Salimi (2007) and Sadeghi (2009) found that EFL learner's collocation proficiency increases as their language proficiency improves.

The second research question addressed in the current study relates to the relationship between collocations and transfer. The results obtained for this research question show that Iranian EFL learners are more likely to use the correct collocation in cases where L1 transfer yields the correct combination in the L2 than when this is not the case. This confirms that positive transfer plays a major role when it comes to EFL learners' ability to choose the correct collocations in their L2. This outcome is in line with Ellis's (1985) view that there should be a reappraisal of the role of the L1 into the L2 setting.

7. Conclusion

The results show that there is a high correlation between the language proficiency and the collocation knowledge of the Iranian EFL learners. The number of correct collocations influenced by L1 transfer is two times bigger than the number of correct collocations not influenced by L1 transfer. This result reveals that when Iranian EFL learners make use of the correct collocations, this is due to positive transfer. However, when the learners choose incorrect collocations, this is typically not due to negative transfer. It was also revealed that the number of incorrect answers not influenced by L1 transfer is bigger than the number of incorrect answers influenced by

L1 transfer. The EFL learners chose the wrong answer in most of the occasions when they did not transfer from to their mother tongue.

The results showed that the number of incorrect answers not influenced by L1 transfer was significantly greater than the number of correct answers not influenced by L1 transfer. Therefore, the possibility of producing incorrect collocations is higher when Iranian EFL learners did not transfer from their mother tongue. The proportion of positive transfer is higher than the proportion of negative transfer in all four types of collocations. This means that in most questions in the collocation test, when Iranian EFL learners transfer from their mother tongue, the results were positive leading to correct answers.

To answer the first research question, it showed that there is a significant correlation between the results in the language proficiency test and the collocation test. It also demonstrated that grammatical collocations are easier to acquire than lexical collocations for the Iranian subjects of this study. There is a statistical difference between the performances of the EFL learners on different collocation sub-groups.

To answer the second research question, the results of the collocation test were investigated. They indicated that the number of correct answers influenced by L1 transfer is considerably greater than the number of incorrect answers influenced by L1. This means that L1 transfer is an important factor in producing correct collocations by Iranian EFL learners. Including collocations in curriculum and encouraging EFL learners to use them appropriately and effectively, will cause an efficient communication.

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Appendix: A Sample from Collocation Test

Choose the correct answer that can best collocate with the bold words.]

1. His latest **album** in the spring.
 - a) emerges
 - b) appears
 - c) comes forth
 - d) comes out
2. The **anniversary** of the founding of the charity..... on the 12th of November.
 - a) falls
 - b) happens
 - c) turns up
 - d) takes place
3. The local authority runs an **advice** in the town.
 - a) house
 - b) center
 - c) corporation
 - d) enterprise
4. The prime Minister was **fire** in parliament for his handling of the budget.
 - a) under
 - b) in
 - c) on
 - d) at
5. He studied his books his father's **advice**.
 - a) at
 - b) under
 - c) on
 - d) in
6. I've always had a certain **fondness** her.
 - a) towards
 - b) for
 - c) of
 - d) in
7. Obviously there wasn't any **point** waiting longer.
 - a) for
 - b) in
 - c) at
 - d) on
8. Education has become an important **campaign**
 - a) issue
 - b) topic
 - c) subject
 - d) problem
9. **Communication** between the two sides has
 - a) broken down
 - b) seized up
 - c) collapsed
 - d) failed
10. **Business** is for estate agents in the south as the property market hots up.
 - a) booming
 - b) growing
 - c) expanding
 - d) prospering
11. The of **government** is usually the effective ruler of the country.
 - a) head
 - b) chief
 - c) president
 - d) leader
12. The stereo phonic earphones can be used in **connection** the new sound system.
 - a) to
 - b) with
 - c) of
 - d) by
13. It's cheaper if you book the ticket **advance**.
 - a) at
 - b) on
 - c) in
 - d) by
14. The value of property almost doubled during the **interim**
 - a) term
 - b) space
 - c) period
 - d) interval
15. He has survived several **assassinations**.....
 - a) ventures
 - b) attempts
 - c) trials
 - d) efforts
16. She was chosen in **preference** her sister.
 - a) to
 - b) for
 - c) over
 - d) upon
17. He managed to find a job an **agency**.
 - a) via
 - b) on
 - c) through
 - d) by
18. He fell down the steps like a **ball** on the ground.
 - a) wheeling
 - b) rolling
 - c) rotating
 - d) revolving