The Effect of Collocational Competence on Translation Accuracy of Translation Trainees

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Abstract

Although it is widely acknowledged that collocations play an important role in the field of second language acquisition, a number of previous studies have reported students' lack of collocational competence and the difficulties they encounter in learning and using collocations. The present study examines the effect of the productive and receptive knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations on the accuracy of the translation done by Iranian EFL learners studying translation course at university. Data for this study were collected from 60 participants studying at Azad university at BA level. The participants' productive collocational knowledge was measured by three gap-filling tests: verb-noun and adjective-noun collocation tests where the initial letter of the collocant was provided and a verb-preposition collocation test where the meaning of the phrasal verb was supplied. Their receptive collocational knowledge was measured by an appropriateness judgment in which participants have to circle the number corresponding to the underlined part of a sentence that is judged unacceptable. Regarding the translation quality of the learners, a text including five paragraphs was given to them and then the accuracy of the translated work was measured by Khanmohammad and OsanloRubic (2009) model. Results of the study indicated that there is a significant relationship between the receptive knowledge and productive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation.

Keywords: Collocation, accuracy, receptive and productive knowledge, translation quality

Introduction

Vocabulary learning has been attracted a lot of attention in teaching of second languages and learning pedagogy. O'Dell (1997, as cited in Milton, 2009) states that, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, vocabulary and lexis were absent from main books on the syllabus and theory of language teaching. The main reason behind this neglect, as Decarrico (2001) states, is a great emphasis on syntax and phonology over vocabulary, under the assumption that vocabulary acquisition could take care of itself. Nonetheless, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, many voices criticize the view that vocabulary can be acquired naturally, leading to an interest in vocabulary teaching and the recognition of the significant role of vocabulary during language acquisition (Decarrico, 2001).

Within the field of vocabulary, another point which can be regarded as a new theory is "word combinations". As Conklin and Schmitt (2007) believe, lexical combinations are very common in language discourse and differentiate the speech of native and non-native speakers. For example, Howarth (1998), when looking at 238,000 words of academic writing, claims that 31−40% was composed of collocations and idioms. Regarding all these studies, we can conclude that word combination forms a large part of any discourse according to Conklin and Schmitt (ibid).

One of these word combination, which has attracted the researchers' interest in the field of second language learning during the last few decades is the collocation (Gitsaki, 1999, Webb &Kagimoto,

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2009). Firth (1957) is considered to be the first to explicitly introduce the term collocation (Gitsaki, ibid; Lien, 2003). In defining collocation, Firth argues that: "You shall know a word by the company it keeps." He exemplifies this by using the English words *dark night* as an example of collocation. He clarifies that one of the meanings of the word *night* allows its collocability with *dark* and vice versa (Hsu 2002).

Most of the experimental research on collocations explores the use of collocations on productive language, especially in writing, but few empirical studies discuss collocations with respect to receptive skills (reading and listening) and none discuss how collocation instruction may specifically benefit language learners' translation quality. However, having a large amount of collocational knowledge may benefit translation from L1 to L2 or vise versa since collocations may help translators process language in chunks instead of individual words. Due to the lack of empirical studies on collocational knowledge in relation to translation quality in general, and translation accuracy in particular, this study will explore the effects of the productive and receptive knowledge of lexical and grammatical collocations on the accuracy of the translation done by Iranian EFL learners studying translation course at university.

Statement of the Problem

Regarding the role of familiarity with collocation in English in enhancing EFL learners' translation quality, no study has been reported. In Iran, in general, collocations seem to be neglected in classroom teaching. Very few teachers raise students' awareness of collocations or stress that English collocation exists and being able to use correct collocations greatly helps a learner to master the language. James (1998) has asserted this point that adherence to the collocational conventions of a foreign language contributes greatly to one's idiomacity and native-likeness, and not doing so announces one's foreignness" (p.152). Herbst (1996) confirms this by saying that competence in a language involves knowledge about collocation (p. 389). Iranian teachers appreciate very little the significance of collocations and action research on this topic is rarely undertaken although students' collocation errors are frequently observed.

In general, in the field of first and second language acquisition, there have been many stud-ies, that have focused their attention on the influence of collocation in language acquisition (Wray, 2002). The majority of these studies support the view that language learners implement "a strategy of segmenting input speech into chunks on the basis of their repeated occurrence in certain situation, memorizing them, and recalling them for use as whole chunks when similar situations come up" (Zhang, 1993, p. 37).

However, the present study differs from the previous studies done in the area of collocation in several ways: (a) It evaluates the productive and receptive knowledge of collocations among Iranian EFL learners' participants; (b) It examines the relationship between translation quality and students' familiarity with three categories of collocations including verb-noun, adjective-noun, and verb-preposition collocations. As far as my knowledge in concerned, no study has been done in this area.

Research Questions

1. Does the receptive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations play any role on the accuracy of the translation done by Iranian undergraduate (B.A.) students of translation studies?

2. Does the productive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations play any role on the accuracy of the translation done by Iranian undergraduate (B.A.) students of translation studies?

Theoretical issues on collocations

The term "collocation" is discussed prevalently in many areas of linguistics, such as semantics, systematic linguistics, morpho-syntax, phraseology, corpus linguistics, and lexicography. Collocations are generally defined as words that "fit together" intuitively with great expectation in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels. The syntagmatic relation of lexical words, which is horizontal, refers to the collocability of words. The paradigmatic relation of lexical words, on the other hand, which is vertical, refers to sets of words in the same class. For instance, the word "dog" is in syntagmatic relation with "hairy" and in padadigmatic relation with "cat." Collocations are predictable patterns and phrases or groups of words that typically co-occur. They include what have traditionally been considered lexical items, as well as structural patterns which may seem closer to grammar and combina-

tions of words that simply "go together." Collocations include noun phrases like *sound investment, wide imagination*, and phrasal verbs like *make up or other stock phrases like the rich and powerful*. Particularly interesting are some subtle and not-easily-explainable patterns of usage that native speakers all know: why we say a *stiff breeze* but not a *stiff wind* while a strong breeze and a strong wind are acceptable.

Among the early studies of lexical combinations, Firth (1957) is known as the first scholar to introduce the term "collocation." According to Firth (1968), "collocations of a given word are statements of habitual or customary places of that word" (p.181). He proposes that words obtain their meaning from their co-occurrence in texts. The subsequent research attempts to define and explain collocations more clearly and specifically. Cruse (1986) proposes that collocations are a "sequence of lexical items which habitually co-occur" (p.40). Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) point out that a collocation unit includes a "node" that co-occurs with a "span" of words on either side. They define collocations as "strings of specific lexical items, such as *rancid butter* and *curry favor*, that co-occur with a mutual expectancy greater than chance" (p. 36). They regard lexical phrases, such as *how are you*, as collocations with pragmatic functions.

Research on collocations has also been influenced by corpus-based research (Aijmer&Altenberg, 1991). These researchers define collocations as pairs or groups of words that recurrently appear in a corpus with a great frequency. However, an existing problem in the study of collocations is determining, in a consistent way, what should be classified as a collocation. In a late research, Nation (2001) proposes ten scales for classifying ranges of collocability. Collocations are expected to be in the higher range in at least several of the scales. The ten scales include frequency of co-occurrence, adjacency, collocational specialization, grammatically connected, grammatically structured, grammatical uniqueness, grammatical fossilization, lexical fossilization, semantic opaqueness, and uniqueness of meaning. Nation's ten scales are related to three main linguistic areas: lexical, grammatical, and semantic aspects.

In the lexical perspective, the most obvious scale, as Nation claims, is "frequency of co-occurrence." That is, collocations should appear recurrently in a corpus and the range of the scale is from "frequently occurring together" to "infrequently occurring together." This is usually measured by computer-based frequency study. The second scale is "adjacency" which is when the individual words in collocations occur next to each other, such as *best regards*, or separated by variable words, such as *little did x realize*. "Collocational specialization" indicates collocability of collocations. The range of the scale is from "always mutually co-occurring" to "all occurring in a range of collocations" with "one bound item" in the middle (p , 331).

In the grammatical aspect, "Grammatically connected" means that there is a grammatical connection between collocates. The scale ranges from "grammatically connected" to "grammatically unconnected." "Grammatically structured" indicates collocations which are grammatically restricted sequences of words with syntactic nature. The scale ranges from "well structured" to "loosely related." "Grammatical fossilization" is when collocates do not allow any change in word, or allow only very small changes. The range is from "no grammatical variation" to "changes in part of speech," with "inflectional change" in the middle.

In semantic perspective, "Lexical fossilization" means the degree of fixedness of the lexical units. The range of the scale is from "unchangeable" to "allowing substitution in all parts" with "allowing substitution in one part" in the middle. "Semantic opaqueness" is when the meaning of collocations cannot be predicted from the meaning of the parts. The scale ranges from "semantically opaque" to "semantically transparent." "Uniqueness of meaning" means some collocations have only one meaning while some may have more than one meaning. The scale ranges from "only one meaning" to "several meanings" with "related meanings" as the mid-point.

Previous Studies on Collocations

Aghbar (1990) conducted a pilot experiment with a set of verb-noun combinations such as to realize goals and to achieve success. In his study, there were three groups including 27 professors, 44 American college students, and 97 ESL students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He used a cloze test consisting of 50 sentences with verb-noun combinations. The results show that native speakers with higher English proficiency produced more appropriate answers than native speakers with lower English proficiency and nonnative speakers. Moreover, Aghbar found that ESL students tended to use "get" in place of other more desirable verbs, for example,

get knowledge, get independence, and get admission. He concludes that ESL learners need to acquire not only a large body of vocabulary but also learn how words combine in collocations if they aspire to achieve native-like fluency.

The use of collocations in the writings of native and non-native college freshman was examined by Zhang (1993). Zhang used written essays and a fifty-item blank filling test to investigate the relationship between collocational knowledge and writing quality. The results show that collocational knowledge is associated with writing fluency and quality.

Moreover, in more recent research, Al-Zahrani (1998) investigates the correlation between Saudi EFL students' knowledge of lexical collocations and their general proficiency in English and their academic levels. The subjects were 81 male Saudi college students whose major was English. They were divided into four groups according to their academic levels. He used a demographic questionnaire, an institutional version of the TOEFL, a blank-filling test of collocations, and a writing test as instruments. The collocations in the blank-filling test were verb-noun collocations chosen from the two textbooks. The results show that there is indeed a significant difference in students' performances on the test of collocations and this is reflected in their academic level and their performances on the writing test as well as the TOFEL test. He suggests teachers should incorporate a large amount of collocations with special emphasis on collocations that do not have linguistic and cultural equivalence in the native language. Another suggestion he gives is that EFL teachers should encourage their teachers to use English collocational dictionaries, such as The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations. He makes a conclusion that even though Saudi EFL students' knowledge of lexical collocation develops along with their general language proficiency, learners still will benefit from intense instruction of collocations.

A similar study was conducted by Bonk (2000). He developed two blank filling tests and one multiple-choice test, which were validated by native speakers. He asked 98 subjects of low-intermediate co-advanced proficiency to fill the blanks with prepositions and verbs in the two blank-filling tests. The subjects also were to circle the least acceptable answer in the multiple-choice test. The results support the findings of AI-Zahrani (1998) and show that observed collocational knowledge is found to correlate strongly with a measure of general ESL proficiency.

Translation Quality

Translation quality was divided into two major categories for assessment purposes: accuracy and clarity. The American Translators Association (ATA) applies a strict definition of accuracy in their accreditation tests. In the ATA's definition, the translator must not interpret but translate each word and grammatical function as defined in dictionaries and grammar texts. In the accreditation test, all words must be included and English editing is discouraged. The ATA's purpose is to reduce translation accuracy to the easiest level for mass testing, removing all possible arguments that may, and often do, arise because of interpretation. In my analyses, I applied a marginally more liberal view to translation accuracy; redundant words and phrases could be dropped if the meaning was not affected, and verbs that required interpretation to determine the tense were not counted as an accuracy error. However, if the interpretation of a verb tense affected the clarity of the English, it was counted as an English error.

Translation accuracy errors may create a document that is impossible to edit without reference to the original text. Therefore, priority was placed on translation accuracy; and errors in accuracy were not recounted as errors in English clarity. The criteria for both accuracy and English flowed from the process model and were divided into the following categories: word, syntax, logic, and subject knowledge.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 70 participants studying translation studies at Azad University at BA level were selected. Regarding the age of the participants, it ranged from 20 to 28, with a mean of 24 and there were 45 males and 25 females in the sample. The level of their proficiency was determined on the basis of their performance in TOEFL proficiency test. In this way, the researcher can make sure that the participants are homogeneous. After analyzing data, those participants placing between one standard deviation above and below the mean were regarded as the main participants. Finally, 52 participants were regarded as the main participants including 22 females and 30 males.

Instruments

General English Proficiency Test: The TOEFL proficiency test was used as the pedestal for evaluating the subjects' level of proficiency in English. This

test included 40 multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension items.

The researcher did a pilot test with 20 students with the same level and similar characteristics to those of the subjects of this study. The correlation coefficient calculated between the test performed in both contexts appeared to be .72. An item analysis was done to calculate the level of difficulty of all items in both contexts. Then, based on the results of this analysis, some items were modified, deleted, or replaced by some new ones. Table 1 indicates the result of correlation coefficient for all items during piloting test for TOEFL proficiency test.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics for TOEFL test during piloting.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.72	40

Productive Collocational Proficiency Test: This test consisted of three gap-filling productive tests and an appropriateness of judgment receptive test. The three gap-filling tests were designed to measure the participants' productive collocational proficiency. They included 48 target collocations that examined three types of collocations: 16 verb-noun collocations, 16 adjective-noun collocations, and 16 verb-preposition collocations. The three tests were used in restrictive structures that allowed only one correct answer. In the verb-noun and adjective-noun collocations tests, the initial letters of the target collocations were provided as a clue, and in the verb-preposition test the meanings of the phrasal verbs were given. This was to prevent guessing and to ensure that participants selected only the target word. Regarding the reliability of this instrument, a pilot study done with 20 participants with the same level of ability. Table 2 shows the results of reliability statistics.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics for Productive test during piloting.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.74	48

The appropriate judgment test was designed to measure the participants' receptive competence in identifying the correct English collocations. It consisted of 75 items; the 48 target collocations used in the three gap-filling tests were included, along with 27 mismatched collocations that acted as distractions. The participants were asked to judge whether the underlined part of a sentence was acceptable or not by circling a number corresponding to the inappropriate part of the sentence. The instruments went through some procedures to eliminate some issues that might affect their validity. One modification was the inclusion of the first letter of the target noun-verb and adjective-noun collocations. This instrument was carefully developed and piloted with 20 participants with the same level of ability before doing the main study and as it is clear from Table 3, it demonstrated a high level of reliability (r=.74).

Table 3. Reliability Statistics for Receptive test during piloting.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.75	75

A pilot study was conducted to check the validity of the instruments as well as to decide on the time needed for participants to finish each test. The target collocations that were missed by most participants in piloting study were considered difficult and therefore were replaced with high-frequency ones.

Translation texts: In order to answer the research questions raised in chapter one, first, some general texts were selected by the researcher and the participants were asked to translate the texts from Persian to English. The researcher tried to use the collocations used in the receptive and productive collocation test in the Persian texts selected for the translation. The researcher asked three university teachers to express their comments on the selected texts and their comments were taken into account in final version of the texts.

Main procedure

All selected students were given a TOEFL proficiency test for the purpose of English proficiency and making sure they will be homogeneous. Then, based on normal probability curve, those between one standard deviation above and below the means were selected as the main participants for the next step of the procedure. Then, they were given the re-

ceptive instrument first. Further, a productive instrument was administered after they complete the receptive test.

Finally, five different texts including five paragraphs were given to them in order to translate the selected texts into English. At the end, the accuracy of the translated work will be measured by Khanmohammad and OsanloRubic (2009) model to see whether there is any relationship between productive and receptive collocational competence of the undergraduate students of translation studies and the accuracy of their translation or not.

Results and Discussion

Research question 1

1. Is there any relationship between the receptive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation done by Iranian undergraduate (B.A.) students of translation studies?

Before doing correlation, we should know whether the data have been normally distributed among the participants or not, which is regarded as one of the assumption for performing correlation coefficient between two variables. Therefore, One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov testwas usedto check whether the data have been normally distributed or not. If the level of significance is more than 0.05, it indicates the normality of data distribution. Therefore, we can use correlation coefficient test for further data analysis.

As it is evident from Table 4, the result of normality test shows that p value for three tests (.991, 944, .363) is more than significance level (0.05).Therefore, we can accept the assumption of normality and we can use Pearson correlation coefficient for comparing the results of three tests used for the purpose of this study.

Table 4. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for receptive and productive correlational knowledge scores, and translation accuracy score.

		Productive	Receptive	Translation accuracy
N		52	52	52
Normal Parameters(a,b)	Mean	27.63	36.67	20.81
	Std. Deviation	7.847	9.787	3.931
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.061	.073	.128
	Positive	.058	.062	.128
	Negative	-.061	-.073	-.096
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.437	.528	.922
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.991	.944	.363

Now, as far as the first research question is concerned, Pearson correlation coefficient was run to see whether there is any relationship between the receptive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for receptive knowledge and translation accuracy.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Translation test	20.81	3.931	52
Receptive knowledge test	36.67	9.787	52

As it is evident from Table 6, there was a moderate, positive correlation between receptive collocational knowledge and translation accuracy, which was statistically significant ($r = .553$, $n = 52$, $p < .0005$).Therefore, we can conclude that having knowledge of receptive collocation can play a role in enhancing the accuracy in translation.

Research question 2

2. Is there any relationship between the productive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation done by Iranian undergraduate (B.A.) students of translation studies?

Now, as far as the second research question is

concerned, Pearson correlation coefficient was run again to see whether there is any relationship between the productive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation.

Table 6. Pearson correlation coefficient for receptive knowledge and translation accuracy.

		Translation test	Receptive knowledge test
Translation test	Pearson Correlation	1	.553(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	52	52
Receptive knowledge test	Pearson Correlation	.553(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	52	52

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for productive knowledge and translation accuracy.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Translation test	27.63	7.847	52
Productive knowledge test	20.81	3.931	52

As it is clear from Table 8, there was a moderate, positive correlation between productive collocationalknowledge and translation accuracy, which was statistically significant (r = .662, n = 52, p < .0005). Therefore, we can conclude that having knowledge of productive collocation can play a role in enhancing the accuracy in translation.

Regarding the questions raised, the statistical analysis of the data revealed that there is a significant relationship between receptive and productive collocational knowledge and the translation accuracy of Iranian Translation students. In other words, receptive and productive collocational knowledge played a significant role in enhancing the accuracy of translation from English into Persian.

Table 8. Pearson correlation coefficient for productive knowledge and translation accuracy.

		Translation test	Productive knowledge test
Translation test	Pearson Correlation	1	.662(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	52	52
Productive knowledge test	Pearson Correlation	.662(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	52	52

It was supposed that translation accuracy is not related to thereceptive and productive collocational knowledge. Finally, the results of this study were against this assumption and proved that thereceptive and productive collocational knowledge plays an effective role.

Conclusion and Implications

Results of the study indicated that there is a significant relationship between the receptive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation, on one hand, and there is a significant relationship between the productive knowledge of lexical collocations and grammatical colligations and the accuracy of the translation, on the other hand.

Unfortunately, no research has been reported about the role of collocational knowledge in enhancing translation accuracy in Iran.

The results of this research support those ofthe previous studies conducted by severalresearchers, one of which was a study by Hsu(2002) regarding factors affecting the learnabilityof lexical collocations. He indicated that one ofthe factors was L1/L2 difference and it playeda key role in producing effective collocations.

The findings of this research also endorse Huang (2001)'s study on Taiwanese EFL learners' knowledge of English collocations. When teaching translation to EFL learners, itwas recommended to integrate the teaching of collocation by including

cultural data, metaphorical meanings and the historical origins associated (Huang, 2001) to reach an ultimategoal of effective communication and take the collocational knowledge into account during their translation.

Similarly, the findings of Farghal and Obiedat (1995) support this research. Theyfound out that Arabic ESL learners and studenttranslators had a problem of collocational deficiency and were unaware of collocations,resulting in their inability to communicate witheffective collocations and translate the related texts with high accuracy and quality. According to them, the only way for ESL/EFL learners to beproficient in the English language was tohighlight the collocational aspects of lexical items. They added that collocations should befocused on seriously among L2 learners and teachers alike and that foreign languagesyllabuses and language instructors should singlecollocations out as the most needed and useful genre of prefabricated speeches (Farghal, & Obiedat, 1995).

This study has also focused on theapplication of different collocational knowledge, which are central to language use and should becentral to language teaching (Zimmerman, 1997, p. 89) and that collocational competence is one of the major means for being successful in EFL/ESL pedagogy."

As with previous studies on collocations, this study demonstrated a consensus in L2 learners' lack of collocational knowledge. The results make apparent a need for more attention to the teaching of collocations. Thus, the following suggested pedagogical implications can serve as a framework for teaching collocation.

Since the educational language environment plays an important role in learning collocations, it may be useful to employ authentic texts in the teaching of collocations in an EFL context. Such texts seem to offer a richer environment for exposure to collocations than in typical EFL textbooks where the input is modified. "When students see words in authentic contexts, they learn how the words function and what their typical collocations are" (Burger &Gallina, 2008, p. 7). Another important point which is worth mentioning is that the texts selected for translation practice in EFL classrooms should be filled by different kinds of collation in order to provide opportunity for them to practice their collocational knowledge during translation.

The inadequate proficiency in the production of collocations calls for a more constructive, instructional focus on collocations. A mixture of approaches, such as explicit and implicit, is essential to generate a productive learning environment. There are various kinds of activities and exercises that can enhance and develop students' productivity skills, such as telling or writing stories of their own past and then highlighting the collocations used. Additionally, teachers can use "collocational grids" or "brainstorming" in which students are provided with words and then asked to list all the acceptable collocates present. It is also very useful to focus on collocations that have no equivalent in the students' first language.

Based on the findings of the present study, more attention should be given to the teaching of adjective-noun and verb-preposition collocations. These have proven to be challenging to the students. For example, this can be accomplished by training students to observe and note the specific types of collocations found during translation and then integrate them in sentences. The students should also be forced to use different categories of collocation during their translation from Persian to English.

In general, this study helped prove the necessity of incorporating the teaching of collocations into the ESL/EFL curriculum for developing students' English proficiency, especially for enhancing the translation accuracy. L2 teachers should introduce collocations to raise students awareness of the importance of this phenomenon. Instructors should demonstrate the idiosyncratic nature of collocations as well as the distinctions among them.

Moreover, the need to develop strategies for the acquisition of collocations is very important. Students can be taught to observe collocations and practice using them in either spoken or written forms outside of the classroom. In addition, one way to improve students' knowledge of collocations is to encourage them to use English collocation dictionaries whenever they are uncertain about the usage of a particular word.

In conclusion, the present study adds to the previous research regarding the importance of collocational knowledge in different areas of studying English. Finally, this study sheds some light on the importance of teaching translationstudents how to increase their collocational knowledge in order to implement them during translation.

Finally, introducing translation students, especially beginners, to a wide range of sources is a quick and easy way to steerstudents away from making mistakes that could easily have been prevented. What is regarded as standard routine for professional translators may and often does come as a novelty to students.

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