

Assessing Chinese-to-English Translation Quality – A Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective

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Abstract

Translation quality assessment is an important issue in translation teaching and learning, but it has been under-researched in translation studies. Whether a translation is good or not depends largely on a translator's ability of text analysis. Taking the translation task of TEM8 (Test for English Majors Band 8) in 2023 as an example, this paper presents a pilot project aimed at exploring a systematic way of analyzing translation errors by referring to systemic functional linguistics (SFL). In particular, the paper investigates how SFL-based text analysis of ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning can be used for translation teaching and learning, through comparative analyses of a set of texts, including a Chinese source text, two translation texts from TEM8 in 2023, and an AI-generated literal translation as back translation. The study finds that it is possible to identify, describe and classify translation errors in the translated texts, and more significantly, the resulting error description and classification allows translation teachers a more precise expression of the nature of poor translation or translation errors that would otherwise be simply put as "inadequate" or "awkward" translation, and students a more tangible understanding of what counts as an "excellent" translation. Following the analyses, the paper discusses the pedagogical effects of SFL-based text analysis by conducting a survey and semi-structured interviews with students. The quantitative data show that overall, students held a positive attitude towards translation, and the qualitative data analysis uncovers specific benefits and challenges experienced by the students.

Keywords: translation quality assessment, TEM 8 translation task, Chinese English majors, systemic functional linguistics, text analysis, pedagogical impacts

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Undergraduate English major education in China began in 1977, when the country started to implement its reform and opening-up policy. Thanks to this policy, English major education has developed by leaps and bounds over the past few decades. In general, its development can be divided into four key stages, namely restoration period from 1977 to 1986, developing period from 1987 to 1997, flourishing period from 1998 to 2009, and adjustment period from 2010 to present (Li & Hu, 2021). The last phase of development derives from the fact that English major is increasingly under criticism for its lack of distinction among different types of colleges and universities offering this major and an incremental decline in its overall training quality across China (Feng, 2016). Therefore, in 2018, China's Ministry of Education promulgated *the National Standards for the Teaching Quality of English Majors in Higher Education* (hereinafter referred to as *the National Standards*) to inject new life into and set new requirements for this major. *The National Standards* states clearly that undergraduate English majors should possess good comprehensive qualities, solid linguistic skills in English language, solid foundations in English literature knowledge, cross-cultural communications ability, and required professional knowledge, with a particular emphasis on possession of solid basic linguistic skills in English language and cross-cultural communication competence.

In this regard, the Test for English Majors - Band 8 (hereinafter referred to as TEM8) has been dedicating itself to aligning with China's national strategy for the training of English language talents since its inception in 1991 (Xu & Liu, 2018). The test focuses on examining senior (fourth-year students) English majors' basic linguistic skills – listening, reading, writing, and translation, and the coordination of the four skills to become competent cross-cultural communicators. For this reason, TEM8 assessment standards have since become an important reference for the teaching of English foreign language talents in colleges and universities nationwide.

The translation task in TEM 8 makes up 15% out of a full score of 100, totaling 15 points. Test-takers are required to translate a passage of about 150 characters from Chinese to English within 20 minutes (Xu & Liu, 2018). The task aims at testing English majors' basic linguistic skills and cross-cultural communication capabilities set in *the National Standards*.

1.2 Problem Statement

Over the years, Chinese English majors' performance in the translation task has been mediocre, reflected by the average scores they

achieved in this session as shown in the following table.

Table 1. English Majors' TEM8 Translation Task Performance

Year	Nationwide Translation Average Score out of a full score of 15	Number of Universities/Colleges
2023	8.68	166
2020-2022	N.A./Incomplete	N.A./Incomplete
2019	9.40	156

Source: TEM Office of Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education

Note: Data from 2020-2022 were either not available or incomplete due to Covid-19.

This paper takes the translation task of TEM8 in 2023 as an example to examine students' translations. The text centers on the topic of traditional Chinese culture, about its past, present, and future, demonstrating the continuity and the innovative nature of the culture and its influence on the Chinese nation throughout history. The passage has a word count of 129 characters as shown below.

中国传统文化是我们先辈传承下来的丰厚遗产。她无时无刻不在影响今天的中国人，为我们开创新文化提供历史根据和现实基础。传统文化在影响现实的同时，也必然在新时代的氛围中发生蜕变。中国传统文化犹如一条奔腾了五千年的永不干涸的大河，她亦旧亦新，不断吐故纳新，持续创新。

After the test, the authors conducted a random oral survey with the test-takers from three universities of different academic rankings in Guangdong Province, China, to enquire about their overall feelings towards the translation task. 30 students took part in the random survey, and more than 2/3 of them felt that the translation task was not difficult considering its length and content. However, as shown in Table 1, the test result of the translation task of TME8 in 2023 presented a different picture, with an overage score of 8.68 nationwide, meaning many of the test-takers had failed the translation task (the passing score is 9). These conflicting results made both teachers and students wonder why the overall score was so low while the translation task was considered easy by many test-takers, and prompted the authors to undertake this study in an attempt to find ways to identify, describe and classify translation errors made by students and present more tangible quality assessment judgements that may be helpful for future translation teaching and learning. So, what kind of translation is can be regarded as "excellent" in TEM8 translation task? What are the assessment standards? Below are the two major standards put forward by TEM8 Review Expert Panel.

TEM8 translation task assessment standards assess students' translation from two dimensions: loyalty to the source text and language appropriateness in the target text. Based on these two dimensions, students' translations are divided into five categories, including Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory, and Extremely Poor, each with a standard for reference as shown in Table 2 (Chen, 2016, p. 78). This set of assessment standards can be found from TEM8 related learning materials and simulated exam papers, and the only one so far available to translation teachers and students.

Table 2. TEM8 Translation Task Assessment Standards

Category	Scores	Assessment Standards
Excellent	15-13	The translation is faithful to the original text, with only 1 to 2 minor errors in word choice, syntax, spelling, or punctuation. The translation is elegant.
Good	10-12	The translation is mostly faithful to the original text, with no significant errors in word choice, syntax, spelling, or punctuation. The translation is readable.
Satisfactory	9-10	The translation is basically faithful to the original text, with occasional errors in word choice, syntax, spelling, or punctuation. The translation is mostly readable.
Unsatisfactory	5-8	The translation only reflects half of the original meaning, with many errors in word choice, syntax, spelling, or punctuation. Some parts of the translation are not readable.
Extremely Poor	0-4	The translation reflects less than half of the original meaning, with almost every sentence containing errors in word choice, syntax, spelling, or punctuation. Most of the translation is not readable.

These assessment standards appear to be vague and subjective as expressions like "faithful, mostly faithful, basically faithful" and the like as well as "elegant, readable, mostly readable", etc., are abstract and sound more like articulations of personal feelings than objective evaluation. This may pose challenges for translation teachers, who need to and are expected to give both formative and summative assessments for students' translations, and provide them with both constructive and detailed feedback. Besides, using too general words without detailed guidelines to specify the criteria and with no proof to justify why the translation is not "faithful" enough to the source text or does not read elegantly may not prove helpful to students, either, who may then try to stick as closely as possible to the source text and avoid making their own choices in case of adding or omitting anything that may lead to unfaithful translation. Therefore, there is a need for a more manageable assessment model that will enable translation teachers to identify, describe and classify translation errors, and help students understand the nature of the translation errors, avoid making them in future translation learning, and find ways to achieve "excellent" translations. To address this issue, the following section introduces the theoretical framework for text analysis based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics or SFL (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2014).

2. Theoretical Framework

The area of translation quality assessment has been “under-researched and under-discussed” (Hatim & Mason, 2005, p. 164), and as the above assessment standards have suggested, regarded as problematic primarily due to its subjective nature (House, 2015). Therefore, there is a need of an assessment framework that can be used as a formative tool in assessing students’ translations, making the process more manageable and the assessment outcome more justifiable.

2.1 Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Halliday’s SFL is a theoretical framework for understanding language which views texts as a process of meaning-making. It emphasizes the social function of language and how it is used to construct meaning in different contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). First, SFL centers around functionality by viewing language as a tool for social interaction and how it is used to perform functions; second, SFL is systemic as it looks at language as a system of options and choices that writers / speakers make to fulfill communicative purposes; third, SFL regards that language has three metafunctions: ideational function conveying logical and experiential meaning, interpersonal function enabling social interaction, and textual function organizing the texts. These three metafunctions correspond to a text’s three meanings, i.e., ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. In addition, language is viewed in the context of the situation in which it is used, including Field (what is going on), Tenor (the social roles) and Mode (the medium of communication). These three variables, field, tenor, and mode realize a text’s ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning, respectively. And when the context of situation changes, the three meanings change, too, reflected by their respective language choice or lexico-grammar. In other words, a text’s distinctive meaning is construed through three different types of meanings: ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning, the last of which organizes ideational and interpersonal meanings into a coherent whole with a natural flow of information. Each mode of meaning is then realized through their respective linguistic system, i.e., transitivity, mood and theme, and associated with the situational variables of register: Field, Tenor and Mode.

SFL’s function-oriented nature makes it a theoretical framework that supports various academic fields connected to the study of language, notably in foreign / secondary language learning to improve migrant students’ literacy and integration into local communities (Dreyfus et al., 2015). More recently, SFL has provided a strong theoretical foundation in translation studies represented by Baker (2017), Hatim and Mason (2014), Munday (2016), Manfredi (2011), and House (2015, 2018), to name just a few. Among these scholars, some have made substantial contributions by incorporating SFL to the field of translation quality evaluation (House, 2014; Kim, 2007; Kim & McDonald, 2012; Manfredi, 2011), in particular House’s seminar work on translation quality assessment model (2001, 2008, 2014), which takes Halliday’s functional linguistic theory as the fundamental framework and walk readers through a detailed comparative analysis of both source and target texts’ ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings with matched and unmatched meanings identified before passing on a judgement on the translation quality. Therefore, it can be noticed that “centrality of meaning and the shared view of meaning” appear to be the core linking SFL and translation studies (Kim, 2009, p. 128), as explained by Newmark (1987, p. 293):

Since the translator is concerned exclusively and continuously with meaning, it is not surprising that Hallidayan linguistics which sees language primarily as a meaning potential, should offer itself as a serviceable tool for determining the constituent parts of a source language text and its network of relations with its translation.

Furthermore, the correlation between contextual variables and lexico-grammatical choices makes SFL highly relevant to translation in general and translation quality assessment in particular. To produce a translated text functional in a particular context of situation (field, tenor, and mode), translators may need to manipulate the source text in the three different aspects by applying a “cultural filter” (House, 2015, p. 68) provided that they possess a good linguistic knowledge of both source and target languages. Translation produced in this way is on the cline of “overt” to “covert” translation, depending on the extent of overtness or covertness that is considered necessary. Therefore, the translator needs to make choices in a way that conveys the three-dimensional meaning of the source text appropriately in the target text, and during this choice-making process, negotiation of meaning is of course, inevitable. In this sense, when assessing a translation, the focus should be on considering the translated text’s three contextual variables and whether their linguistic resources have been properly used to recreate the three different kinds of meanings instead of grammatical errors given that a potential translation containing no grammatical errors may still be discarded if it does not fit the target text’s contextual situation. This perspective on translation quality assessment distinguishes SFL-based model from other assessment models that highlight “loyalty” and “smoothness” without plausible analytical tools.

The above discussions of concepts and notions in SFL and their relevance to translation studies have implications for translation assessment. That is, first, a good translated text should be treated as a discourse fulfilling its functions within a specific context, and second, the focus of assessment should not be on finding grammatical errors in the translated texts, but more importantly, on identifying, describing, and classifying errors, and judging whether or not the whole translation text serves its function within the context. That said, the following section presents studies applying SFL to translation assessment.

2.2 Literature Review of SFL-based Translation Assessment

Manfredi (2014) integrated SFL into English-to-Italian translation education. Starting with a global Hallidayan Register analysis of the source text’s three metafunctions and cultural context, her research made use of House’s “overt” to “covert” cline of macro translation strategies (2015) and Nord’s (2014) translation “brief” to determine the translation strategies and target readership. She explored various types of texts within this SFL framework in translation practice, including science articles, tourist guidebooks, research articles in

sociology and politics as well as fictional texts. Her research demonstrated the applicability of SFL perspective to translation training: freeing students from the confinement of the source text's surface structure and engaging them in more profound reflections on lexis choices for delivery of a text's multi-dimensional meaning.

Noticing the linguistic differences between English and Korean and a lack of research on using systemic functional text analysis in translation training featuring this language pair, Kim (2007, 2009) conducted a series of research into this field. In one study, she focused on applying theme-rheme structure development to analyze students' translation errors, i.e. those related to cohesion and coherence, or textual meaning within an SFL framework. The research found that inappropriate theme-rheme structure development in translation may disrupt information flow in the target text and make the translation awkward. For instance, in Korean science texts, inanimate objects are rarely used as the Actor in a doing process, but it is a common practice in English ones. Her study also found that most students viewed SFL-based text analysis positively because it helped them produce a more natural and smoother flow of information in the translated texts.

In another case study, Kim addressed the issue of interpersonal meaning transfer in translation (2009). The source text is an English text titled *The Indian Exception*, an excerpt from an article published in *The Economist*. The students were required to translate the text into Korean for a similar magazine in Korea. After a brief on the source text's three contextual variables of field, tenor and mode that helped students identify the relationship between the text writer and its target readers, the author gave a detailed account of why a seemingly harmless rendering of the modal finite "might" in the last sentence of the source text to "would" in the Korean text was not just a simple lexical error, but rather a serious issue. Referring to SFL, Kim explained that though both modal verbs conveyed the experiential meaning, the modal word "would" conveyed more certainty of the text writer's attitude towards the situation described than "might" did. In light of this, using "would" instead of "might" distorted the text writer's original attitude, constituting a breach on delivery of interpersonal meaning. The study concluded that systemic functional text analysis was particularly helpful for explaining specific translation errors from a function-performance perspective, and therefore, conducive to developing students' skills of critical thinking, enabling them to assess their own translated texts and, ultimately, improve their translation performance.

The literature review shows the benefits of integrating SFL knowledge into translation practice. However, there has been little research on Chinese-to-English translation that covers the three dimensions of meaning transfer in general, and TEM8 translation task in particular. To address this issue, the following section will illustrate how SFL-informed assessment model is applied to TEM8 2023 Translation Task with sample texts. For the purposes of illustration, a Chinese source text, two students' translations, and an AI-generated literal translation, will be used. The AI-generated text will be used to facilitate understanding of the source text meaning.

3. Research Design

3.1 Participants

Thirty-three senior English majors from one intact group took part in this study. Among them, 5 were male and 28 female students, with an average age of 20.3 years. The participants started to learn Chinese-to-English translation in the first semester of the academic year 2023-2024. Before that, they had not received any systemic training of SFL-based text analysis in translation learning. A translation teacher with a PhD in translation studies taught the class Chinese-to-English translation for that semester (16 weeks). A series of activities had been designed to help students understand and internalize SFL theory and skills in meaning-oriented text analysis and to deal with challenges involved in translating different text types from Chinese to English, such as expository texts, informative texts and short prose excerpts, etc. The translation teacher was requested to, as much as possible, keep balance between the design and organization of class activities aiming to facilitate students' translation learning and the instruction on how to apply the new assessment tool—SFL-based text analysis to assess their translations.

3.2 Research Instrument

Two surveys and one semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. The first survey was conducted to check students' assessment of two translated texts by deciding which one was better and summarizing the reasons for their preferences. The second survey (see Appendix 1) contained three questions about students' experience of applying functional linguistic text analysis to translation learning. Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5 were used to match students' responses to the three questions, with 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. Finally, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2) with four students were carried out to probe into students' perceptions of applying text analysis in translation learning. All surveys were carried out in the last week of the term in order to make sure that students had received sufficient knowledge, training and practice of SFL-based text analysis for translation assessment.

3.3 Ethics

All participants were ensured of anonymity of participation and data usage. The series of class activities designed for SFL-based text analysis in translation learning were supported and approved by the Academic Committee of the School of Foreign Languages in that University.

4. Data Analyses and Discussions

4.1 Students' Reactions to Two Translated Texts

The Chinese source text (see 1.2) contains four sentences. To help facilitate understanding and comparison of TEM8 test takers' two

translations in TEM8 2023, an AI-generated literal translation or back translation (short for BT) is presented side by side the Chinese Source Text (ST), as shown in in Table 3, sentence by sentence.

Table 3. Chinese Source Text and AI-generated Back Translation

Chinese Source Text	AI Back Translation (or BT)
S1 中国传统文化是我们先辈传承下来的丰厚遗产。	Traditional Chinese culture is a rich heritage passed down from our ancestors.
S2 她无时无刻不在影响今天的中国人，为我们开创新文化提供历史根据和现实基础。	It constantly influences modern Chinese people, providing historical and practical foundations for the creation of new cultures.
S3 传统文化在影响现实的同时，也必然在新时代的氛围中发生蜕变。	Traditional culture, while affecting reality, is also bound to transform in the atmosphere of the new era.
S4 中国传统文化犹如一条奔腾了五千年的永不干涸的大河，她亦旧亦新，不断吐故纳新，持续创新。	Traditional Chinese culture is like a surging river that has flowed for five thousand years without drying up. It is both old and new, constantly discarding the old and embracing the new, and continues to innovate.

Two translation answers from TEM8 in 2023 are presented below. It should be noted that Translation 1 was a composite text that included instances of bad / wrong translations and while Translation 2 was an original excellent answer with minor adjustments. The purpose of these alterations is for the ease of demonstration. Sections in bold in Translation 1 highlight problems / errors, while italicized sections in Translation 2 highlight appropriate translation adjustments.

TRANSLATION 1

Chinese traditional culture is the abundant wealth inherited from our previous generations. **It** does not influence the Chinese people nowadays at no time by building the basis of history and reality for us to **innovate our culture**. While influencing the reality, it **will** have a new life in the atmosphere of new era. Like a never-ending river having **flooded** 5, 000 years, **it** mixes with tradition and new development and continues to innovate.

TRANSLATION 2

The traditional Chinese culture is the fruitful heritage that our ancestors have passed on to us. She affects Chinese people every now and then, providing us with historical roots to trace and realistic basis to facilitate in developing a new culture. The traditional culture definitely *keeps transforming in the new era while it exerts influences on reality*. She *unrelentingly brings novelty and innovation, growing out of the old, as a river that has flown unrelentingly for 5,000 years, old yet new*.

Before initiating a detailed discussion of students’ responses to application of SFL-based text analysis in translation learning, it is worth looking into how students reacted to the two selected translations which were presented anonymously in class. The students were asked to choose a better one and list the reasons for their preferences.

A majority (Group 2, 27) chose TRANSLATION 2 over TRANSLATION 1 (Group1, 6), and their reasons for their preferences were summarized in Table 4:

Table 4. Students’ responses to the two translations

TRANSLATION 1 (6, about 18%)	TRANSLATION 2 (27, about 82%)
Close to the source text with its shorter clauses.	Very close to the source text but reads naturally despite its relatively longer clauses.
Simple words for easy understanding.	More advanced words but still easy to understand.

As mentioned above, responses to translation are intuitive, and therefore subjective in nature. Both groups referred to faithfulness to the ST and ease of understanding as the criteria when it comes to their responses to two translations (TEM8 Translation Assessment Standards). Those who chose Translation 1 (18%) stated that shorter clauses and simple words made the translation faithful to the ST and easy to understand. On the contrary, those who preferred Translation 2 (82%) cited relatively longer clauses and more advanced words made the translation more faithful to the ST and easier to understand. The teacher then revealed that Translation 1 was a bad answer whereas Translation 2 an excellent one in TEM8 in 2023, and asked Group 1 to join Group 2 to carry out SFL-based text analyses of both texts from the three dimensions of meaning delivery: ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. And students were asked to give examples or evidence to justify their decision making for each dimension of meaning transfer.

After a heated discussion, a general agreement was reached by the students. In terms of field, the ST is about the history and development of traditional Chinese culture and its impacts on China. In terms of tenor, the ST expresses the author’s admiration for traditional Chinese culture, typically manifested by the third person pronoun 她(*ta*) or she / her in English. And in terms of mode, it is a written text. Theme analysis at the sentence level (four sentences) shows an obvious coherence pattern, that is, each sentence begins with traditional Chinese culture to introduce new information. The newly introduced information, though further developed, is NOT picked up as Theme in the following discourse. With this analysis, students agreed that a good translation should have the same register and function as the ST, so they decided on a more covert translation with retention of some obvious “overt” translations so that the target readers can understand the

development of traditional Chinese culture and its revered status in the heart of the Chinese people.

The teacher then guided the students to think further of what should be done in order to produce a covert translation. To do so, some translation adjustments had to be made by taking into consideration the expected register of the translated text at the context level and its realization at the lexico-grammatical level. In particular, attention should be paid to nominal and processes that realize ideational meaning (field), pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and modal finite that realize interpersonal meaning (tenor), and theme-rheme development and other cohesive devices that realize textual meaning (mode). A good translation should take into account of all these details when choosing syntactical structures and lexical choices in order to render a translation that meets the expected register.

4.2 Detailed Text Analyses

With this general agreement, a detailed analysis was carried out from the perspective of the three dimensions.

4.2.1 Ideational Meaning

The nominal phrase 中国传统文化 *zhongguo chuantong wenhua* or Chinese traditional culture as literally translated, appears three times in the source text, and it was rendered exactly in the same order into English in Translation 1. In Translation 2, however, it was rendered in a different way, i.e., traditional Chinese culture. So, which one is accurate, Chinese traditional culture or traditional Chinese culture? In fact, both "Chinese traditional culture" and "traditional Chinese culture" are grammatically correct, but they differ from each other. Chinese culture has both traditional and contemporary ones, but the core is that they are both Chinese cultures. "Chinese traditional culture" places "Chinese" as a descriptor of "traditional culture". However, in English, when a noun phrase has more than one attribute, the more important one is placed closer to the nucleus of the phrase. Therefore, in "Chinese traditional culture", it places more emphasis on "traditional", while in reality, it should be on "Chinese" rather than "traditional". Therefore, this translation may sound a bit less natural to English native speakers. On the contrary, "traditional Chinese culture" emphasizes "traditional" as an adjective describing "Chinese culture", and therefore, this phrase is more accurate and resultantly, the preferred term in academic and formal contexts. For instance, in *The Governance of China III*, the term is translated as "traditional Chinese culture", not the other way round (Xi, 2022, p. 365). Other similar renderings include traditional Chinese medicine, traditional Chinese costumes, and the like.

Another example of inaccurate transfer of ideational meaning is reflected in translating the "process" in the second clause of S2. The ST states "*wei women kaichuang xinwenhua tigong lishi yiju he xianshi jichu*". Here, the key verb *kaichuang*, means "to create" or "to develop". While "innovate" and "create" are often used interchangeably, they each carry distinct connotations and implications. "Innovate" refers to the process of introducing new ideas, methods, or products that bring about positive change. On the other hand, "create" encompasses the act of bringing something into existence or producing something original. Based on these explanations, *kaichuang* highlights developing something new and original on the basis of the traditional one. Therefore, the rendering of *kaichuang* in Translation 2 (*developing a new culture*) is more appropriate than Translation 1 (*to innovate our culture*). Another wrong translation of processes is the rendering of 奔腾 *benteng* in clause 1 of S4 in the ST. The Chinese verb phrase carries the metaphorical meaning of rivers surging like galloping horses, indicating the vigor of traditional Chinese culture. In Translation 1, this vivid image was rendered as "flooded", a totally different picture, and worse still, a negative one of traditional Chinese culture. In Translation 2, the translator used "unrelentingly flow" to describe "river", which, though not a faithful transfer, is still considered a good remedy to make up for the loss.

That said, two points were deducted from Translation 1.

4.2.2 Interpersonal Meaning

In SFL, usage of pronouns, modal finite, adjectives and adverbs carry the speaker/writer's attitudes towards the subject matter, realizing interpersonal meaning.

In the ST, the animate third-person pronoun "她" (*ta*) is used to refer to "traditional Chinese culture" and it appears twice (the first clause of S2 and the second clause of S4). In Translation 1 (as well as AI-generated translation), *ta* (*she*) is rendered as *it*, an inanimate third-person pronoun. One might treat this error of translating *she* into *it* as a minor lexical mistake, or simply ignore this kind of error as the clause translated in this way still conveys the ideational meaning. However, considering *she* is an animate pronoun, and addressing "traditional Chinese culture" as *she* involves the rhetorical device of personification, i.e., comparing "traditional Chinese culture" to an animate human being, *she* indicates the writer's attitude towards traditional Chinese culture, whereas *it* erases the writer's deep affection and admiration for the culture. In light of this, the seemingly harmless lexical error was regarded as a serious interpersonal error. Translation 2 retained the "overtness" of the expression and rendered *ta* faithfully as *she* with one exception (the second clause of S3, hence 0.5 point was deducted), thus accurately conveying the writer's opinion about "traditional Chinese culture".

In addition, in the ST, adverbs like "必然地" (second clause of S3, meaning something is destined or bound to happen) and "不断" (third clause, S4, meaning continuously) acted as a carrier of the writer's full confidence in traditional Chinese culture's transformation in the era and her unstoppable strive for innovation. In Translation 1, "必然地" was reduced to the modal finite "will", which, while still sharing the writer's confidence, had greatly eclipsed it; and "不断" was simply overlooked, almost completely erasing the writer's opinion about traditional Chinese culture's hard struggle for innovation. In Translation 2, "必然地" and "不断" were translated as "definitely" and "unrelentingly", respectively, both of which accurately conveyed the writer's confidence on the prospects of traditional Chinese culture.

In light of this, three points were deducted from Translation 1.

4.2.3 Textual Meaning

Textual meaning mainly revolves around the issue of cohesion and coherence and is represented by thematic development. In the ST, each of the four sentences starts with “traditional Chinese culture” and its variations, such as *ta* and *chuantong wenhua* or *the traditional culture*, displaying a tight and consistent coherence pattern. More importantly, all of the four Themes are unmarked themes as they are the subject of the sentences (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2014). This coherence pattern is typical in Chinese essays, where the Theme of the second sentence is usually picked up from the Theme of the first sentence, known as T2T1 type (Liu & Yang, 2011). In Translation 1, however, there were three different Themes out of the four translated sentences, namely *Chinese traditional culture*, *It*, *While influencing the reality*, and *Like a never-ending river*. Among these four Themes, the first two are unmarked whereas the latter two marked – adverbial groups (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2014). The frequent changes of Themes and usage of marked and unmarked Themes within a short paragraph interrupt the information flow, thus the text fails to achieve the intended coherence of the ST. Moreover, Translation 1 followed the ST very closely in transferring the clauses. In S3, it translated *yingxiang xianshi* (influencing the reality or affecting reality in BT) first, followed by *zai xinshidai fasheng tuibian* (have a new life in the atmosphere of new era or bound to transform in the atmosphere of the new era in BT). This direct transfer of the ST syntactical structure did not improve smoothness of the information flow as the previous clause was about *kaichuang xinwenhua* or creating a new culture. Furthermore, this translation did not conform to the English syntax, either, as English sentences tend to be right-branching with key information usually placed at the beginning supplemented by less important information. This is the opposite of the Chinese syntax, where sentences tend to be left-branching (Sun, 2022). The same applied to the translation of S4. Though compared to Translation 2, Translation 1 was relatively shorter, its usage of a marked Theme and strict adherence to the ST did not contribute to the natural information flow of the text.

In Translation 2, the translator kept all the unmarked Themes in the ST, which to a large extent, preserved the smooth flow of information. However, there were some adjustments in the development of the Rhemes. For instance, in S3 of Translation 2, the translator purposefully reversed the order of the two clauses in the ST by removing *ye biran zai xinshidai de fenweizhong fasheng tuibian* (BT: also bound to transform in the atmosphere of the new era) to the front. This maneuver is a “cultural filter” employed to produce a more covert translation in English, because in English texts, the T2R1 type of thematic progression is favored, i.e., the Theme of the second clause is picked up from the Rheme of the first clause). Though in this case, it is not exactly the same, but by translating “bound to transform in the atmosphere of the new era” first as in the translation “definitely keeps transforming in the new era”, the translation further developed the Rheme of the precious clause *kaichuang xinwenhua* (BT: the creation of a new culture). With these adjustments, Translation 2 managed to achieve better coherence of the text in English. The same “cultural filter” is applied to translation of S4, where the translator moved the more important information – *buduan tugu naxin, chixu chuangxin* (unrelentingly brings novelty and innovation or BT: constantly discarding the old and embracing the new, and continues to innovate) to the front of the sentence followed by the adverbial clause that compared traditional Chinese culture to a surging river. This information restructuring also conforms to the syntactical rule that English sentences tend to be right-branching with statements of key information first and supplementary information later (Sun, 2022). For this, 2 more points were deducted from Translation 1.

With the examples presented above, students finally arrived at a translation assessment statement that Translation 2 (14 points, another half point was deducted from the repetitive use of the adverb “unrelentingly” for lack of variation) outperformed Translation 1 (8 points in total) in terms of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning deliveries, and therefore Translation 2 was a much better answer than Translation 1. In addition, with the comparison, students also came to realize the problems in the AI-generated translation, many of which had been identified in Translation 1. They also noticed that both Translation 1 and AI translation tended to be more redundant in expression. For instance, in both translations, the Chinese phrase *fenweizhong* (BT: in the atmosphere of) in the second clause of S3 in the ST was preserved, while in fact, it is totally unnecessary to retain this expression in English.

The demonstration above showed the usefulness and effectiveness of SFL-based text analysis in translation error identification, classification and description for understanding the nature of mistranslation, unjustifiable transfer of the ST syntax, and unnatural translation. The illustration also served to give support for this type of assessment and the reasons for deciding on point deduction. Therefore, SFL-based meaning-oriented criteria enables both teachers and students to explain which aspect of meaning was mistranslated and why. It is a much more powerful and reliable analytical tool than the TEM8 Translation Assessment Standard’s yardstick of faithfulness and readability, where “mistranslation” and “inappropriate expression” were so abused that they did not mean anything except that the translation was not right.

4.3 Survey and Interview Results

This section discusses the pedagogical efficacy of SFL-based text analysis based on the results of students’ survey and the interviews with them conducted at the end of term.

4.3.1 Survey Results

Below is the result of Survey 2 on students’ perception of SFL-based text analysis in translation learning.

Table 5. Students' Perception of SFL-based Text Analysis in Translation Learning

Survey Questions	N	Mean Score
Q1	33	4.03
Q2	33	4.17
Q3	33	4.07

Table 5 shows that with an average score of more than 4.00 for each item, students held positive attitudes towards application of SFL-based text analysis in translation learning. They found its incorporation into the translation course was at an appropriate level of difficulty for them, that meaning-oriented analysis helped them think critically about some translation issues, and that overall, they had improved their translation competence and skills. These findings are in line with studies by Kim (2007, 2009), and Manfredi (2011, 2014).

4.3.2 Interview Results

The interview aimed to explore students' experience of learning translation using SFL-based text analysis and their suggestions for improvement.

In response to Q1, students did not view applying text analysis in translation learning too difficult or too challenging, and they explained that:

“Our teacher gave us a lot of support throughout the learning process. He guided us to go through the text-analysis of both the ST and the translation.”

“It was quite difficult to follow at the very beginning, but as we practiced more using text-analysis to analyze texts, we gradually learn how to do it, though we need our teacher's help from time to time.”

“The source texts we had so far were relatively short and simple, and with the teacher's guidance, we were able to do text analysis with the SFL framework.”

“We did not know that much about SFL, but I think what the teacher had taught us is enough for us to carry out text analysis of some simple and short passages.”

From these explanations, it can be noted that the teacher's scaffolding efforts and the selection of simpler and shorter texts for exercise are the main reasons why students felt SFL-based text analysis was not too challenging in translation learning.

In response to Q2 regarding the role of SFL-based text analysis as a tool for developing critical thinking skill, students had the most positive response (m=4.17), and here are their understandings:

“Text-analysis helped me realize that language has function, and understand why a translation is considered a mistranslation or a non-idiomatic translation.”

“Yes, more importantly, SFL text analysis enables us to systematically explain why one choice is better than the other instead of just an intuitive response that other choices are not good enough.”

“SFL text analysis helped me understand better the linguistic similarities and differences between Chinese and English, and how language can be constructed to express meanings in different ways in translation.”

“With SFL, I broadened my understanding of what translation should be from the three different aspects of meaning deliveries, in particular interpersonal and textual meanings, whose importance was just basically overlooked in the past.”

These comments show the usefulness of SFL-based text analysis in helping students analyze texts and translations in a more systematic and critical manner as they broadened and deepened their understanding of the two languages and the process of translation.

In response to Q3 about perceived improvement in translation skills, students gave the following comments:

“I believe I have improved my translation skill, particularly in making choices in the aspect of interpersonal meaning transfer. However, I still need the teacher's guidance to help us go through the analytical process. Otherwise, I don't think I can do it by myself.”

“Before learning this analytical tool, I would just jump to translate. Now, I will do text analysis first from field, tenor and mode, and then think of how my translation can *be natural* by using the right lexical choices and grammar. In fact, I applied the skills to my writing, too. But the teacher's instruction is still key to me.”

“SFL made me rethink the translation process and see the text as a whole. It helped me to resist the temptation of finding equivalence in English, and look for lexical choices to produce a natural translation. Besides, it helped me realize that AI-generated translation was not as correct as I thought it should have been, so we could not take it as it is.”

“One more takeaway from this course is that recreating meaning is not stiff adherence to the source text. Translation adjustments are necessary and even indispensable to transfer the meaning more faithfully. And I learn how to justify those adjustments, but sometimes I still need my teacher's help to clarify some issues. I think we still need to know more about SFL.”

These quotes show that students found SFL-based text analysis very helpful for explaining options of lexical choices to recreate meanings in translation and different aspects of translation quality; they also extended its application to other courses such as writing. In addition,

they voiced the necessity of more SFL input so that they could better master the analytical tool.

To address this issue, the interview further explored students' suggestions for improving translation teaching and learning:

"I think maybe we could introduce text analysis one term earlier, when we started to learn English-to-Chinese translation, so that we could have more time to learn this analytical skill."

"And not just in translation course, other courses as well, like English writing and English reading, as they are all about using English to create meaning and make it understood."

"And with more exposure to SFL, we will be able to use the skill to analyze more complex texts. Currently, they are relatively short and simple."

"If we could extend and expand the learning of SFL-based text analysis, we may be able to analyze more complex texts and do translation quality assessment on our own in the future."

These extracts indicate that students wanted both extension and expansion of SFL-based text analysis in their study, as they hoped to be more skilled in using this analytical tool and be independent when carrying out translation quality assessment in the future.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed the application of SFL-based text analysis to a set of texts, namely a Chinese source text from TEM8 Translation Task in 2023, two translation answers, and an AI-generated translation. The comparative analyses focused on deliveries of the three meta-functions of text: ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. SFL-based text analysis was the main tool and the foci of analyses were terms/words, phrases, and thematic development at the text level. The analyses reveal that being bilingual is not a guarantee of excellent or good translation. Knowledge of SFL and SFL-based text analysis provide the much-needed tool for both translation teachers and students to navigate the translation and assessment process.

Pedagogical effects of SFL-based quality assessment model were examined through survey and semi-structured interviews with students. Both quantitative and qualitative data showed that in general, students had positive learning experience following SFL-based text analysis, with both benefits and challenges specified. They developed better understanding of what a good translation is: a good translation should break through the surface meaning of the original Chinese terms to achieve equivalence in reference, context, style, and collocation, avoid redundancy in the original Chinese text, restructure the translated sentences, and ensure that the translated sentences conform to the English syntactical rules and that its information flows naturally (Deng, 2017). They also expressed deeper understanding of what cross-cultural communication abilities mean, especially in the field of translation learning, and articulated their suggestions to improve translation teaching / learning using SFL-based text analysis tool.

Thus, the paper suggests that SFL theory with its meaning-oriented text analysis has great potential as a tool for translation teaching and learning for the language pair of Chinese and English, in particular with its panoramic view of text and attention to details, and that more studies featuring this language pair should be encouraged to tap and explore this tool's potential.

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Authors' contributions

Dr. Weijia Chen was responsible for study design, data collection and revising. Dr. Chunming Wu assisted in data analysis. Dr. Chen drafted the manuscript and Dr. Wu revised it. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript. Both authors agreed that Dr. Chen contributed 70% to the study and Dr. Wu 30%.

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Appendix 1: Survey 2 Questions

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
1. I find the application of SFL-based text analysis in the <i>Chinese-to-English Translation Course</i> was at an appropriate level for me.					
2. I find SFL-based text analysis helpful to develop my critical thinking skills.					
3. I find SFL-based text analysis helpful to improve my translation competence and skills.					

Appendix 2: Interview Question

What is your overall feeling towards using SFL-based text analysis in the Chinese-to-English Translation Course? Please elaborate from the perspectives of the three questions in Survey 2 and talk about your suggestions for future implementation in this course.