

Reducing Pragmatic Errors in Translation Through Interlanguage-Aware Pedagogical Strategies

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Abstract: Pragmatic competence constitutes a core component of translation competence and directly affects the effectiveness of intercultural communication. However, pragmatic errors frequently occur in translation learning and training, particularly among learners operating in a second-language environment. Drawing on interlanguage theory, this study investigates how the permeability and stability of learners' interlanguage systems contribute to both linguistic and sociolinguistic pragmatic errors in translation output. Rather than treating pragmatic failure as a mere performance problem, the paper conceptualizes such errors as systematic manifestations of interlanguage development. Through theoretical analysis and illustrative examples, the study demonstrates that negative language transfer and fossilization play a crucial role in shaping recurrent pragmatic deviations in translation. On this basis, the paper proposes interlanguage-aware pedagogical strategies for translation education, including input-oriented training, functionalist translation pedagogy, and reflective use of computer-assisted translation tools. The study aims to provide both theoretical insight and practical guidance for improving pragmatic competence in translation teaching and learning.

Keywords: Translation Education; Pragmatic Errors; Interlanguage; Language Transfer; Pedagogical Strategies

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1.Introduction

Translation functions as a form of mediated intercultural communication, in which the accurate conveyance of communicative intention is of paramount importance. Even when grammatical and lexical accuracy is achieved, pragmatic errors in translation may still result in misunderstanding or communicative failure. In translation education, such errors are often treated as isolated mistakes or performance deficiencies, while their underlying developmental causes receive comparatively limited attention.

Interlanguage theory, originally developed within the field of second language acquisition, offers a productive theoretical lens for examining pragmatic errors in translation learning. Translation learners, like other second-language users, operate within an evolving interlanguage system that is shaped by both their native language and the target language. The permeability and stability of this system influence not only linguistic accuracy but also pragmatic appropriateness in translation output.

This study applies interlanguage theory to the analysis of pragmatic errors in translation, with particular attention to their

pedagogical implications. By examining linguistic and sociolinguistic pragmatic errors through the characteristics of interlanguage permeability and stability, the paper seeks to clarify why certain errors persist despite continued learning and practice. More importantly, it aims to explore how translation teaching can address these issues through targeted pedagogical strategies. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in translation education concerning the development of pragmatic competence.

2. Pragmatic Competence and Translation Education

Pragmatic competence has long been recognized as an essential component of communicative competence in second language acquisition. In the context of translation education, pragmatic competence occupies an even more central position, as translators are required not only to understand meaning but also to reconstruct communicative intentions across linguistic and cultural boundaries. However, compared with grammatical accuracy and lexical equivalence, pragmatic competence has often been underrepresented in translation teaching objectives and assessment criteria.

Translation competence is widely understood as a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing linguistic competence, cultural competence, textual competence, and strategic competence. Pragmatic competence intersects with all these components, as it governs the appropriate selection of linguistic forms in relation to context, purpose, and audience. From an educational perspective, pragmatic errors in translation therefore reveal not only deficiencies in language knowledge, but also limitations in learners' ability to integrate contextual and cultural information into translation decision-making.

In many translation classrooms, pragmatic issues are addressed implicitly rather than systematically. Learners are often expected to "develop a sense of appropriateness" through exposure and practice, without explicit pedagogical guidance. As a result, pragmatic deviations are frequently attributed to carelessness or insufficient proficiency, rather than being analyzed as developmental phenomena rooted in learners' interlanguage systems. This pedagogical tendency obscures the underlying mechanisms that give rise to recurrent pragmatic errors and limits the effectiveness of corrective feedback.

From the perspective of translation education, pragmatic errors should be treated as diagnostic indicators of learners' interlanguage development. Such errors provide valuable insight into how learners conceptualize meaning, context, and cultural norms during translation. When systematically analyzed, they can inform curriculum design, teaching strategies, and assessment practices. In this sense, pragmatic failure is not merely an obstacle to be eliminated, but a pedagogical resource that reveals the dynamic interaction between language acquisition and translation training.

Integrating pragmatic competence into translation education requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining both variability and persistence in learners' translation behavior. Interlanguage theory offers such a framework by conceptualizing learner language as a structured, yet evolving system influenced by multiple linguistic and cultural inputs. By situating pragmatic errors within this framework, translation educators can move beyond surface-level correction and address the cognitive and developmental factors underlying learners' translation choices.

3. Pragmatic Errors in Translation: Typology and Pedagogical Relevance

The concept of pragmatic failure was first systematically discussed by Jenny Thomas, who distinguished between linguistic pragmatic failure and sociolinguistic pragmatic failure within Leech's pragmatic framework^{[1][2]}. Linguistic pragmatic failure refers to inappropriate linguistic choices that hinder the intended communicative effect, whereas sociolinguistic pragmatic failure arises from violations of social or cultural norms governing language use.

Subsequent scholars further expanded the concept. Gabriela defined pragmatic failure as a primary cause of communication breakdown in cross-cultural interaction.^[3] Riley emphasized that pragmatic failure results from the interaction between different sociocultural systems, arguing that communicative behavior constrained by one set of norms may become inappropriate when transferred to another context.^[4] In China, He Ziran introduced the concept of pragmatic failure and described it as errors in communication that fail to achieve the expected effect due to inappropriate language use or speech style.^[5] Qian Guanlian and Liu Shaozhong further clarified that pragmatic errors may occur even when linguistic forms are grammatically correct, as long as interpersonal or sociocultural conventions are violated.

Building on these studies, this paper adopts Thomas's binary classification to analyze pragmatic errors in translation. In the

context of translation education, linguistic pragmatic errors typically involve inappropriate lexical choices, literal translation, or mismanagement of grammatical categories, while sociolinguistic pragmatic errors are closely related to insufficient cultural awareness and inappropriate contextual adaptation. Importantly, both types of errors can be interpreted as external manifestations of learners' interlanguage systems rather than accidental mistakes. Table 1 summarizes the relationship between major types of pragmatic errors in translation, their interlanguage origins, and corresponding pedagogical strategies.

Table 1. Types of pragmatic errors in translation and corresponding pedagogical strategies

Type of pragmatic error	Typical manifestations in translation	Interlanguage feature	Pedagogical focus
Linguistic pragmatic errors	Inappropriate lexical choice; literal translation; unnatural collocation	Interlanguage permeability; negative transfer	Input enhancement; contrastive analysis; usage-based learning
Sociolinguistic pragmatic errors	Cultural misrepresentation; inappropriate register; symbolic mistranslation	Interlanguage stability; fossilization	Functionalist pedagogy; contextual analysis; reflective evaluation

4. Interlanguage Theory as an Explanatory Framework

Interlanguage refers to an independent linguistic system developed by second-language learners during the process of language acquisition. Corder described interlanguage as a transitional competence that evolves as learners test and revise hypotheses about the target language. Nemser characterized it as an approximate system that continuously approaches the target language without necessarily fully converging with it. Selinker emphasized the systematicity and observability of interlanguage, arguing that it constitutes a structured system distinct from both the native language and the target language.^[6] Later studies further confirmed that interlanguage is dynamic, rule-governed, and empirically observable. In China, Lu Jianji and Lv Bisong contributed to the localization and refinement of interlanguage theory, highlighting its relevance to foreign language learning and error analysis.^[7]

Beyond its structural properties, interlanguage is also characterized by permeability and stability. Permeability refers to the openness of the interlanguage system to influence from both the native language and the target language, resulting in positive or negative transfer. Stability, often associated with fossilization, describes the tendency of certain interlanguage features to become resistant to change despite increased exposure to the target language.

In translation learning, these characteristics significantly affect pragmatic performance. Pragmatic errors can thus be understood as the result of interlanguage rules being activated in translation tasks, particularly when learners rely on stabilized or negatively transferred forms that are pragmatically inappropriate in the target language.

4.1 Interlanguage Permeability and Linguistic Pragmatic Errors

The permeability of the interlanguage system allows translation learners to continuously incorporate new target-language input. At the same time, it also enables negative transfer from the native language, which is a major source of linguistic pragmatic errors.^[8] Such errors often arise from incomplete mastery of target-language rules or overreliance on native-language structures.

In Chinese–English translation, lexical ambiguity frequently poses challenges. For instance, the Chinese term “政客” may correspond to both politician and statesman in English. Although semantically related, the two words differ significantly in pragmatic connotation: politician often carries a negative or neutral implication, whereas statesman is generally positive. Translation learners who fail to distinguish these pragmatic nuances may produce translations that distort the speaker's intended evaluation.^[9]

These errors are not simply lexical inaccuracies but reflections of interlanguage permeability, where native-language conceptual categories exert undue influence on target-language expression. Literal translation and structural calquing further exacerbate this problem, leading to translations that are formally accurate but pragmatically inappropriate or stylistically unnatural.

From a pedagogical perspective, linguistic pragmatic errors highlight the need for sustained and context-sensitive target-language input. Translation education should therefore emphasize not only vocabulary expansion but also pragmatic differentiation and usage-based learning, helping learners gradually refine their interlanguage systems.

4.2 Interlanguage Stability and Sociolinguistic Pragmatic Errors

Building on existing pragmatic theories, pragmatic errors in translation can be broadly classified into linguistic pragmatic errors and sociolinguistic pragmatic errors. While this binary classification has been widely applied in studies of cross-cultural communication, its pedagogical relevance in translation education deserves further elaboration.^[10]

Linguistic pragmatic errors in translation typically involve inappropriate lexical selection, rigid syntactic mapping, or excessive reliance on formal equivalence. These errors occur when translators choose linguistically correct forms that fail to achieve the intended communicative effect in the target context. For translation learners, such errors often reflect incomplete pragmatic differentiation within the target language, where semantic equivalence is prioritized over contextual appropriateness.

Sociolinguistic pragmatic errors, by contrast, arise from misalignment between translation choices and sociocultural norms. These errors frequently involve culturally embedded expressions, honorifics, evaluative language, and symbolic imagery. In translation education, sociolinguistic pragmatic errors are particularly challenging because they are less visible at the level of linguistic form and more resistant to correction through rule-based instruction.

From a pedagogical standpoint, distinguishing between these two types of pragmatic errors allows educators to design targeted instructional interventions. Linguistic pragmatic errors are more amenable to correction through enhanced input, contrastive analysis, and usage-based learning. Sociolinguistic pragmatic errors, however, require explicit discussion of cultural assumptions, communicative purposes, and audience expectations.

Importantly, both types of pragmatic errors should be understood as systematic rather than random. Their recurrence across learners and tasks suggests that they are rooted in shared interlanguage features shaped by common learning experiences. Recognizing this systematicity shifts the focus of translation education from error elimination to developmental support, encouraging educators to address pragmatic competence as an integral component of translation training.

5. Interlanguage-Aware Pedagogical Strategies for Translation Teaching

From an interlanguage perspective, pragmatic errors in translation are not accidental deviations but systematic outcomes of learners' evolving linguistic systems. Consequently, pedagogical strategies in translation education should aim not merely at correcting surface errors, but at reshaping the underlying interlanguage mechanisms that give rise to such errors. This section proposes an interlanguage-aware pedagogical framework for translation teaching, focusing on input enhancement, functionalist-oriented instruction, and reflective, technology-assisted learning.^[11]

5.1 Input Enhancement and the Development of Pragmatic Awareness

Input plays a decisive role in interlanguage development, as it continuously reshapes learners' hypotheses about the target language. In translation education, however, input is often treated primarily as a source of linguistic forms rather than pragmatic norms. From an interlanguage-aware perspective, input enhancement should explicitly target pragmatic awareness, particularly in relation to context-sensitive meaning and usage.

For translation learners with an intermediate or advanced language foundation, input should be diversified and contextualized rather than limited to decontextualized texts.^[12] Authentic materials such as speeches, interviews, news reports, and institutional discourse provide rich pragmatic cues related to register, stance, and audience orientation. Exposure to such materials enables learners to observe how meaning is pragmatically constructed and negotiated in real communicative settings.

Listening-based input, when combined with guided reflection, is especially effective in cultivating pragmatic sensitivity. Unlike written texts, spoken discourse foregrounds implicit meaning, evaluative language, and interactional norms, all of which are crucial for translation competence. By engaging with multimodal input, learners can gradually internalize pragmatic distinctions that are often obscured in purely text-based instruction.

Pedagogically, contrastive analysis should be integrated into input-oriented activities. By systematically comparing native-language and target-language realizations of similar communicative functions, learners become more aware of negative transfer tendencies within their interlanguage systems. Such awareness facilitates the restructuring of interlanguage representations and reduces the likelihood of recurring linguistic pragmatic errors.

5.2 Functionalist Pedagogy and Contextual Decision-Making in Translation

While enhanced input contributes to maintaining interlanguage permeability, addressing sociolinguistic pragmatic errors requires pedagogical approaches that directly engage with context, purpose, and audience. Functionalist translation theory provides a particularly suitable framework for this purpose. By prioritizing communicative function over formal equivalence, functionalist pedagogy encourages learners to view translation as a goal-oriented activity rather than a process of linguistic substitution.

In translation teaching, a functionalist approach shifts instructional focus from “correctness” to “appropriateness.” Learners are guided to analyze translation tasks in terms of intended function, target readership, and situational context. This orientation helps destabilize fossilized interlanguage patterns that rely on default equivalence and promotes more flexible pragmatic decision-making.

Classroom activities grounded in functionalist pedagogy may include purpose-driven translation assignments, comparative analysis of multiple translations for different audiences, and guided discussions on alternative translation strategies. Through such activities, learners develop the ability to justify their translation choices pragmatically, which in turn enhances their metacognitive awareness of translation processes.

From an interlanguage perspective, functionalist pedagogy plays a corrective role by challenging stabilized pragmatic assumptions embedded in learners’ interlanguage systems. By repeatedly confronting learners with context-dependent translation decisions, this approach facilitates the gradual reconfiguration of sociolinguistic representations that are otherwise resistant to change.

5.3 Reflective Use of CAT Tools in Translation Education

Technology-assisted translation has become an indispensable component of contemporary translation education. While computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools and machine translation systems are often introduced for efficiency and professional relevance, their pedagogical potential extends far beyond instrumental use. From an interlanguage-aware perspective, CAT tools can serve as powerful resources for reflective learning and pragmatic awareness development.

Machine translation systems, despite their increasing sophistication, still exhibit limitations in handling ambiguity, idiomatic expressions, evaluative language, and culturally embedded references. These limitations mirror many of the pragmatic challenges faced by translation learners. By systematically comparing human translations with machine-generated output, learners can identify pragmatic inadequacies and reflect on their own translation choices.

Such comparative activities externalize learners’ interlanguage systems, making implicit assumptions visible and open to evaluation. When learners analyze why machine translations fail pragmatically and how human translators can improve upon them, they engage in higher-order reflection on pragmatic norms and communicative intent. This process is particularly effective in addressing sociolinguistic pragmatic errors associated with interlanguage stability.

In addition, translation assessment and self-evaluation should be integrated into CAT-based activities. Learners can be encouraged to develop individualized evaluation criteria focusing on pragmatic adequacy, audience orientation, and cultural appropriateness. Over time, this reflective evaluation process contributes to the gradual destabilization of fossilized interlanguage patterns and supports sustained pragmatic development.

Table 2: Reflective use of CAT tools for pragmatic awareness in translation education

Teaching activity	Learning objective	Focused pragmatic issue	Expected pedagogical outcome
Human-machine translation comparison	Develop pragmatic judgment	Idioms; cultural references	Awareness of pragmatic inadequacy
Error annotation and revision	Identify interlanguage patterns	Fossilized equivalence	Reduction of stabilized pragmatic errors
Peer evaluation using CAT output	Enhance metapragmatic reflection	Audience orientation	Improved contextual decision-making

Conclusion

From the perspective of interlanguage theory, pragmatic errors in translation can be understood as systematic outcomes of

interlanguage permeability and stability. Linguistic pragmatic errors are largely associated with negative language transfer and insufficient differentiation of target-language usage, while sociolinguistic pragmatic errors are closely linked to stabilized interlanguage patterns and cultural fossilization.

This study argues that pragmatic failure in translation should not be viewed merely as an individual performance issue, but as a pedagogically meaningful indicator of learners' interlanguage development. By adopting interlanguage-aware teaching strategies, including enhanced target-language input, functionalist translation pedagogy, and reflective use of CAT tools, translation education can more effectively address the root causes of pragmatic errors.

Reducing pragmatic errors is essential for ensuring effective intercultural communication through translation. Future research may further explore empirical classroom-based studies to test the effectiveness of these pedagogical strategies and refine their application in different translation teaching contexts.

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