

Analysis of Chinese-English Translation in Shanghai Gaokao English and Preparation Strategies

GAO Jiateng, Aini Aliya

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The Shanghai Gaokao English is characterized by diverse question types, a high difficulty level, and innovative thematic content. Among these, the single-sentence Chinese-to-English translation task stands out as a distinctive component, presenting challenges, such as extensive vocabulary requirements, implicit grammatical testing, mandatory use of provided parenthetical words, and the incorporation of “four-character structures” (四字格). Candidates frequently experience significant score losses in this section during preparation and mock examinations. This paper analyzes practical methodologies for tackling Chinese-English translation tasks by examining authentic questions from Shanghai Gaokao English (spring and autumn examinations) over the past six years, aiming to provide teachers and students with effective test-taking strategies.

Keywords: Shanghai Gaokao English, Chinese-English translation, four-character structures

Introduction

The translation section assesses students’ ability to purposefully select vocabulary and grammatical structures to convey meaning accurately, demonstrate logical coherence, and fulfill the requirements outlined in the curriculum standards. The test design emphasizes guiding candidates to recognize linguistic and cognitive differences between Chinese and English expressions. For instance, phrases, such as “丝丝脉络” (intricate connections), “纷至沓来” (flocking in succession), and “古色古香” (classic elegance) in the translation tasks allow for diverse interpretations, encouraging candidates to flexibly apply acquired knowledge to reproduce the original meaning.

The Shanghai Gaokao English, recognized as one of the most advanced large-scale English proficiency assessments in China, objectively reflects the English competency of Shanghai high school students. Its difficulty level falls between the CET-4 and CET-6 (China’s College English Test), with substantial lexical overlap with the English section of the national postgraduate entrance examination. The single-sentence translation task, a distinctive feature of this exam, not only serves as an indicator of teaching quality and a catalyst for improving students’ English proficiency, but also plays a guiding role in the reform of high school English education in China. Furthermore, it effectively showcases the exceptional English capabilities of Shanghai students to both domestic and international audiences.

GAO Jiateng, Master of Translation and Interpreting, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Aini Aliya (Corresponding author), Ph.D., associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Characteristics of the Translation Section in Shanghai Gaokao English

Following the recent Gaokao reform, the translation section now constitutes 10% of the total score in the Shanghai Gaokao English examination. This section comprises four items: two short sentences (10-15 Chinese characters each, three points per sentence) and two longer sentences (20-30 Chinese characters each, worth four and five points respectively), totaling 15 points. The topics span diverse domains, including social phenomena and civil affairs (approximately 35%), traditional culture and arts (25%), nature and technology (20%), and daily life and philosophical themes (20%).

An analysis of 11 exam papers from Shanghai's spring and autumn Gaokao sessions between 2020 and 2025, encompassing 44 Chinese-to-English translation tasks, reveals a consistent increase in difficulty. The primary challenges lie in achieving “faithfulness” (信) and “expressiveness” (达)—two core principles of translation—while “elegance” (雅) remains secondary in this context. Key difficulties include extensive vocabulary demands, implicit grammatical points that candidates often fail to recognize, and frequent incorporation of “four-character structures” (四字格), a uniquely Chinese linguistic feature. These structures have become such a prominent obstacle that social media platforms are flooded with compilations of “standard translations” for common four-character phrases. However, given the section's broad scope and limited weighting, rote memorization of fixed expressions proves ineffective for score improvement. Instead, developing a systematic translation strategy grounded in methodological approaches is far more critical than mechanical memorization.

Key Challenges and Strategic Solutions

Lexical Challenge: Strategic Approaches to Four-Character Structures

Chinese “four-character structures” (四字格) often incorporate metaphors, allusions, or profound cultural connotations, yet rarely find direct equivalents in English phraseology. Translating these expressions requires careful consideration of linguistic disparities and the application of diverse translation techniques.

Based on an examination of translation tasks from the past six years, four-character structures can be categorized into free phrases and fixed idioms. Free phrases are further classified into: natural phenomena and landscapes (e.g., “春暖花开, 古色古香”), temporal changes and transitions (e.g., “日新月异, 细水长流”), cultural and artistic themes (e.g., “民俗文化, 书法元素”), and social and lifestyle concepts (e.g., “青年才俊, 顾客为本”). Fixed idioms predominantly consist of culturally specific proverbs and collocations (e.g., “昙花一现, 不期而遇”). While free phrases permit flexible translation based on context, fixed idioms demand thorough comprehension of their inherent cultural nuances. To address these challenges, the following methodologies are recommended:

Literal translation vs. paraphrasing. Literal translation prioritizes preserving the structural integrity and surface meaning of the source text. This approach is suitable for phrases with transparent semantics and parallel constructions (e.g., “春暖花开” → spring warmth and flower blooms). Key principles include:

- (a) Maintaining lexical correspondence;
- (b) Preserving structural symmetry;
- (c) Prioritizing cultural imagery.

However, rigid adherence to literal translation risks producing unnatural outputs (e.g., “古色古香” → “ancient color and old fragrance” vs. context-appropriate “vintage charm”).

Paraphrasing emphasizes conveying implicit meanings and cultural intentions through idiomatic target-language expressions. This method prioritizes readability and cultural adaptability over structural fidelity. For instance, “细水长流” may be rendered as “sustained effort over time” rather than a literal “thin water long flow”. While paraphrasing enhances naturalness, translators must guard against “excessive domestication”—over-assimilation that erases cultural distinctiveness.

The following presents a dual-method translation comparison for selected four-character phrases from recent Shanghai Gaokao English exams, demonstrating the interplay between literal and paraphrasing approaches:

(1) 丝丝脉络 (2025 Spring Exam)

Literal translation: Silken threads and hidden veins

(Retains the metaphorical imagery of “丝丝” as “silken threads” and “脉络” as “veins”, preserving textual delicacy.)

Paraphrasing: Intricate connections/detailed framework

(Abstracts the core meaning to emphasize “complex interrelations” or “structural precision” suitable for academic discourse.)

(2) 古色古香 (2025 Spring Exam)

Literal translation: Ancient colors, antique fragrances

(Directly mirrors “古色” and “古香”, though the English collocation of “colors” and “fragrances” appears unnatural.)

Paraphrasing: Vintage charm/classical elegance

(Substitutes cultural imagery with idiomatic terms highlighting timeless aesthetics, aligning with English idiomatic norms.)

(3) 青年才俊 (2024 Spring Exam)

Literal translation: Young talents and brilliant minds

(Preserves lexical components of “青年”, “才”, and “俊”, yet redundantly duplicates “talents” and “minds”.)

Paraphrasing: Promising young professionals

(Condenses the essence into a socioculturally resonant phrase, emphasizing career potential.)

(4) 走马观花 (2023 Spring Exam)

Literal translation: Ride a horse to glance at flowers

(Retains the action but fails to convey the idiomatic meaning of “superficial observation”.)

Paraphrasing: Take a cursory look/skim through

(Prioritizes functional equivalence by discarding metaphorical imagery for clarity.)

(5) 细水长流 (2022 Autumn Exam)

Literal translation: Thin water flows long

(Adheres to literal semantics but risks misinterpretation of “thin water” as physical texture.)

Paraphrasing: Steady and sustainable/slow and steady progress

(Transforms the natural metaphor into an abstract concept of persistence, enhancing cross-cultural accessibility.)

(6) 春暖花开 (2020 Autumn Exam)

Literal translation: Spring warms, flowers bloom

(Maintains seasonal imagery and syntactic parallelism, though stylistically rigid.)

Paraphrasing: Spring in full bloom

(Streamlines the expression to emphasize vitality, conforming to English poetic conventions.)

In Gaokao translation tasks, the primary objective is to demonstrate linguistic accuracy and cultural fluency. While literal translations preserve source-text aesthetics, they risk compromising readability if cultural or syntactic gaps remain unaddressed. Paraphrasing, though functionally effective, necessitates careful calibration to avoid over-domestication. Examinees must strategically:

(1) Assess context: Prioritize literal methods for structurally transparent phrases (e.g., “春暖花开”) and paraphrasing for culture-bound idioms (e.g., “走马观花”).

(2) Optimize clarity: Favor natural English expressions unless explicitly required to replicate Chinese rhetorical features.

(3) Balance fidelity and fluency: Use amplification/omission judiciously to bridge cultural-linguistic divides.

This analytical framework equips candidates with a systematic approach to navigating four-character structures, aligning examination performance with pedagogical objectives in cross-cultural communication.

Utilizing English idiomatic equivalents. This approach involves substituting four-character structures with English idioms or fixed expressions of analogous meaning. While effective for achieving cultural resonance, it demands significant linguistic proficiency from candidates, as it requires mastery of both Chinese and English collocational systems. Given its low frequency in actual exam questions, rote memorization of such pairings is pedagogically inefficient. However, selective acquisition of common equivalents can enhance compositional versatility, particularly in essay writing.

Illustrative examples:

(1) 不期而遇 (2021 Autumn Exam)

Literal: Met without prior arrangement

Idiomatic: Unexpectedly met

(Employs adverbial modification to convey serendipity, though “serendipitous encounter” offers greater literary sophistication at the cost of lexical accessibility for high school learners.)

(2) 昙花一现 (2020 Spring Exam)

Literal: Ephemeral as a night-blooming cereus

Idiomatic: A flash in the pan

(Adopts an English idiom denoting transient success, achieving cultural equivalence while sacrificing botanical specificity.)

Methodological considerations:

(1) Strategic prioritization: Focus on high-frequency idioms (e.g., “Rome wasn’t built in a day” for “非一日之功”) rather than exhaustive memorization.

(2) Contextual flexibility: Reserve idiomatic usage for writing tasks where stylistic enrichment is prioritized over translation fidelity.

(3) Risk mitigation: Avoid forced substitutions that may distort original meanings (e.g., misapplying “butterflies in the stomach” for “忐忑不安”).

Pedagogical recommendation:

This strategy serves as a supplementary rather than primary approach. For advanced learners, curated integration of 15-20 idiom pairs during preparation can yield dual benefits:

(a) Enhanced translation adaptability for rare exam occurrences;

(b) Strategic deployment in essay writing to demonstrate rhetorical sophistication.

Grammatical Challenges: Identification and Accurate Expression of Syntactic Structures

The translation section of the Shanghai Gaokao English examination places significant emphasis on grammatical competence, accounting for approximately half of the assessment criteria. Beyond foundational syntactic elements (basic sentence structures, tenses, voice, etc.), particular attention is given to advanced grammatical phenomena including attributive clauses, noun clauses, adverbial clauses, participial constructions, and specialized sentence patterns. The challenges primarily manifest in two dimensions: first, examinees' ability to recognize implicit English grammatical structures embedded within Chinese source texts; second, their capacity to select appropriate syntactic representations post-identification. This dual requirement necessitates not only comprehensive mastery of the aforementioned grammatical concepts and their practical application, but also the development of a systematic analytical framework to ensure precise structural recognition.

Relative clauses in translation. Relative clauses constitute a critical grammatical focus in the Shanghai Gaokao English examination, extending beyond traditional grammar-focused questions to frequent appearances in Chinese-English translation tasks. Candidates must prioritize both the recognition and accurate translation of such structures during preparation.

Translation hierarchy for Chinese attributives:

When rendering Chinese attributives into English, a hierarchical approach is recommended:

- (1) Adjectival conversion: Use single-word adjectives (e.g., “古老的建筑” → “ancient architecture”).
- (2) Participial phrases: Employ present/past participles (e.g., “正在建设的桥梁” → “the bridge under construction”).
- (3) Relative clauses: Deploy when semantic complexity or syntactic length exceeds simpler structures (e.g., “历经百年风雨的古城” → “the ancient city that has weathered centuries”).

Empirical analysis of 2020-2025 exam papers reveals that relative clauses are predominantly required in the following contexts:

- (a) Lexical triggers: Attributives containing explicit verbal elements (e.g., “由……建造” and “以……为特色”).
- (b) Structural complexity: Extended phrases exceeding 15 Chinese characters (87% occurrence in Questions 3-4).
- (c) Punctuation cues: Commas in the source text typically signal non-restrictive clauses (非限制性定语从句).

Exemplar translations from past exams:

- (1) 双层楼的酒店古色古香，坐落于半山腰上…… (2025 Spring Exam)

The two-story hotel, whose antique charm is meticulously preserved, nestles on the mountainside...

Analysis: “Whose” clarifies possession; non-restrictive structure mirrors the descriptive comma in Chinese.

- (2) 在剧中汽车工业一直是该城市的骄傲。 (2023 Autumn Exam)

...a fictional city where the automobile industry has long been its crowning achievement.

Analysis: “Where” locates the antecedent (“city”); “crowning achievement” enhances lexical sophistication.

- (3) 这条运河历经数百年才修建而成…… (2022 Autumn Exam)

This canal, which took centuries to construct, stands as a testament to...

Analysis: “Which” introduces supplementary detail; participial phrasing (stands as a testament) compensates for Chinese verbal density.

Pedagogical recommendations:

Contextual drills: Practice identifying verbal elements within attributives (e.g., “由……设计” → “designed by” → “which was designed by”).

Punctuation mapping: Train students to correlate Chinese commas with non-restrictive clause markers in English.

Differentiated practice: Prioritize Questions 3-4 simulations to familiarize candidates with high-frequency relative clause contexts.

Noun and adverbial clauses in translation. Noun clauses (serving as subject, object, or predicative) and adverbial clauses (indicating time, condition, purpose, or concession) constitute recurrent grammatical foci in Shanghai Gaokao translation tasks. While structurally more transparent than relative clauses, these constructions demand precision in conjunction selection, tense consistency, and syntactic integrity to avoid logical ambiguities.

(1) Subject clauses:

Structural cue: Sentences initiating with abstract nominal phrases (e.g., “……的奇妙之处在于”).

Key strategy: Use “what”-clauses or “that”-clauses to mirror Chinese subject-predicate inversion.

Exemplar (2024 Autumn Exam):

这个博物馆的奇妙之处在于……

What makes this museum magical is that...

Analysis: “What” introduces the subject clause; “that” bridges the predicative component, preserving rhetorical emphasis.

(2) Object clauses:

Structural cue: Verbs of communication/perception (e.g., “通知, 认为”) followed by explanatory content.

Key strategy: Maintain “that”-clauses without omitting subordinating conjunctions.

Exemplar (2023 Spring Exam):

他接到通知, 实验结果一时半会还出不来。

He was informed that the results would not be available soon.

Analysis: Explicit retention of “that” ensures syntactic clarity despite its optionality in colloquial English.

(3) Predicative clauses:

Structural cue: Copular verbs (e.g., “是, 意识到”) linking subjects to abstract complements.

Key strategy: Embed “that”-clauses post-copula to replicate Chinese explanatory patterns.

Exemplar (2023 Autumn Exam):

你是否意识到……?

Are you aware that every tribe has its own rules?

Analysis: “That” formalizes the predicative relationship, avoiding fragmented syntax.

(4) Purpose clauses:

Structural cue: Phrases like “为的是”, “以便” indicating intentionality.

Key strategy: Employ “so that” or “in order that” for explicit purposive linkage.

Exemplar (2022 Autumn Exam):

……为的就是享受悠闲惬意的生活。

...so that we can enjoy a leisurely life.

Analysis: “So that” clarifies intentionality; modal “can” reinforces feasibility.

(5) Conditional clauses:

Structural cue: Hypothetical markers (e.g., “若不, 假如”) introducing prerequisites.

Key strategy: Use “if”-clauses with ellipsis for concision.

Exemplar (2023 Spring Exam):

若不精心安排, 明天的美术馆之行就变成走马观花。

If not carefully arranged, the visit will become a cursory glance.

Analysis: Elliptical structure (“if not”) streamlines the conditional without repeating the subject.

(6) Concessive clauses:

Structural cue: Universal quantifiers (e.g., “无论, 不管”) paired with disjunctive options.

Key strategy: Adopt “whether...or” or “no matter” construction.

Exemplar (2024 Spring Exam):

无论是音乐还是绘画……

Whether it is music or painting, ...

Analysis: “Whether” establishes concessive inclusivity; “it is” ensures syntactic completeness.

Strategic recommendations:

(a) Conjunction precision:

Map Chinese logical markers (e.g., “为的是” → “so that”; “若不” → “if not”) systematically.

(b) Tense harmonization:

Align main and subordinate clause tenses (e.g., past reporting verbs + “would” for futurity in the past).

(c) Ellipsis management:

Apply subject/verb omission only in conditionals (“if not”) to avoid ambiguity.

Participle constructions. Participles (present and past) frequently function as adverbials or attributives in translation tasks, requiring candidates to discern the logical relationship between the participle and the matrix clause’s subject. These constructions often allow interchangeable conversion with subordinate clauses, necessitating flexible adaptation.

Exemplar translations:

(1) Present participle (active/progressive):

这座夜市数十年经历了风雨…… (2025 Spring Exam)

Having undergone decades of trials, this night market...

Analysis: The present perfect participle (“having undergone”) emphasizes completed action with ongoing relevance; active voice aligns with the subject (“night market”).

(2) Past participle (passive/completed):

脑海里浮现出那段为理想而奋斗的青春岁月。 (2021 Autumn Exam)

...reminded him of his youthful days fighting for ideals.

Analysis: The past participle (“reminded”) establishes passive causation, while the present participle (“fighting”) conveys concurrent action.

Strategic guidelines:

Logical consistency: Ensure participles share the same subject as the main clause.

Temporal sequencing: Use perfect participles (e.g., “having + past participle”) to denote prior actions influencing the main clause.

Special syntactic structures. Emphatic, inverted, and imperative structures are less frequent in translation tasks but remain testable. Mastery of their basic forms suffices for examination purposes.

Exemplar translations:

(1) Emphatic structure:

正是因为贯彻“顾客为本”的理念…… (2022 Spring Exam)

It was precisely by implementing the customer-centric philosophy that...

Analysis: The “it-cleft” structure (“it was...that”) amplifies causal emphasis while maintaining syntactic balance.

(2) Inverted structure:

羽毛球馆空无一人，但为什么灯还亮着？ (2021 Spring Exam)

How come the badminton court is empty, yet the lights remain on?

Analysis: “How come” inverts standard interrogative order to reflect rhetorical surprise, mirroring the Chinese “为什么……还” structure.

(3) Imperative structure:

打喷嚏时，务必用纸巾遮住口鼻。 (2021 Autumn Exam)

Do cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when sneezing.

Analysis: The emphatic “do” reinforces the imperative’s urgency, aligning with the Chinese “务必”.

Translation Process and Preparation Strategies

In Gaokao translation tasks, candidates should prioritize clarity, idiomaticity, and alignment with scoring criteria emphasizing “semantic accuracy and syntactic fluency.” Below is a systematic workflow for effective task execution:

Translation Workflow

Step 1: Holistic comprehension:

(1) Identify core components: Locate the subject-predicate-object framework to isolate key information.

(2) Annotate critical elements: Highlight provided words (e.g., “undergo” and “whose”) and culture-specific terms (e.g., “日新月异” → “rapid evolution”).

Step 2: Syntactic analysis:

(1) Classify sentence type: Determine simple, compound, or complex (with subordinate clauses) structures.

(2) Pinpoint grammatical focus: Recognize tested structures (relative clauses, adverbial clauses, participle constructions, and emphatic sentences).

Step 3: Culture-bound term processing:

(1) Select translation method: Choose between literal translation, paraphrasing, or idiomatic substitution.

(2) Contextual adaptation: Adjust based on rhetorical purpose (e.g., “academic” vs. “narrative contexts”).

Step 4: Syntactic construction:

(1) Ensure agreement and tense consistency: Align subject-verb relationships and temporal logic.

(2) Logical cohesion: Integrate conjunctions (e.g., “however” or “therefore”) to mirror Chinese causal/contrastive markers.

Step 5: Revision and polishing:

(1) Mandatory element verification: Confirm correct usage of bracketed vocabulary.

(2) Stylistic optimization: Eliminate redundancy and enhance idiomaticity (e.g., “make improvements” → “refine”).

Strategic Preparation Guidelines

1. Systematic grammar mastery:
 - Modularize learning (clauses, participles, and special syntax) using “真题例句” for contextualized practice.
2. Lexical expansion:
 - Prioritize culturally loaded vocabulary (e.g., “一带一路” → “Belt and Road Initiative”, “碳中和” → “carbon neutrality”).
- (3) Timed task simulation:
 - Conduct mock exams focusing on integrated challenges (e.g., translating “四字格” within relative clauses).
- (4) Error analysis and remediation:
 - Catalog recurrent errors (e.g., misplaced modifiers and conjunction misuse) for targeted correction.

Through structured categorization and task-specific drills, candidates can achieve “structural precision and expressive fluency”—dual pillars of Gaokao translation excellence.

Conclusion

Analysis of Shanghai Gaokao English translation tasks (2020-2025) reveals examiners’ pronounced emphasis on “four-character structures” (四字格) and “complex syntactic frameworks”. This design not only evaluates candidates’ cross-linguistic competence, but also reflects the examination’s alignment with global educational trends prioritizing intercultural communication skills.

The translation methodologies discussed—from grammatical deconstruction to cultural adaptation—extend beyond utility. They cultivate precise lexical selection and sophisticated syntactic control, competencies that prove invaluable in tertiary English education and professional communication. For educators and learners alike, iterative reflection on these strategies fosters the pedagogical ideal of “厚积薄发” (profound accumulation enabling breakthroughs) and “游刃有余” (effortless mastery), ultimately bridging the gap between linguistic training and real-world application.

References

- Bachman, L. F. (1999). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Feng, Q. H. (2002). *Practical translation textbook*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Li, S. Y. (2011). Analysis of extra-linguistic information in interpretation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 32(3), 41-44.
- Liu, H. P. (2011). Phases of translation competence development and pedagogical approaches. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 32(1), 37-45.
- Liu, M. Q. (2006). *Guidance on English-Chinese translation skills*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.
- Liu, R. Q., & Han, B. C. (1991). *Language testing and its methods* (rev. ed.). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Mu, L. (2006). Translation competence and translation testing. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, 21(2), 43-47.
- Mu, L. (2007). Definition and orientation of translation testing. *Foreign Language Education*, 29(1), 82-86.
- Newmark, P. (2001). *A textbook of translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- PACTE. (2008). First results of a translation competence experiment: Knowledge of translation and efficacy of the translation process. In J. Kearns (Ed.), *Translator and interpreter training: Issues, methods and debates* (pp. 106-107). London: Continuum.
- Pan, M. W., & Xu, X. X. (2010). Construct validity of Chinese-English sentence translation tests based on corpus. *English Teaching & Research Notes*, 33(4), 65-73.
- Rong, X. M. (1999). Analysis of 1998 Shanghai College Entrance English Test. *Teach Yourself English*, 15(2), 50-54.
- Shanghai Educational Examinations Authority. (2016). *National College Entrance Examination (Shanghai volume): Examination handbook*. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.

- Wang, Z. Y. (2012). New perspectives on translation competence. *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*, 33(3), 43-47.
- Xiao, W. Q. (2012). Multi-componential translation competence model and test construct. *Foreign Language Education*, 34(1), 109-112.
- Xu, X. X. (2006). Practice and progress in language testing: Twenty years of independent English testing in Shanghai College Entrance Examination. *Journal of China Examinations*, 16(8), 51-54.
- Yang, Z. H., & Wang, K. F. (2010). Translation competence and related studies. *Foreign Language Education*, 32(6), 91-95.
- Zhai, Z. D. (2007). *Linguistics in translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.