



SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATIONS AND AI IN CLASS: DEVELOPING LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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Abstract: *Generative artificial intelligence has entered the English-language classroom faster than most curricula have caught up with it, and the debate surrounding its use often echoes an older one in literary studies: is a derivative product — a translation, a chatbot answer, a stage adaptation — necessarily inferior to its source? This article argues that literary adaptation, understood through the theoretical vocabulary developed in the author’s doctoral research on Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations, offers unusually productive content for teaching English with AI, precisely because it resists single correct answers and rewards close comparison. Drawing on recent empirical research on generative AI in English language teaching (ELT) and on case studies from the thesis — Nahum Tate’s happy-ending King Lear, the Women’s Theatre Group’s Lear’s Daughters, Federico García Lorca’s The Public, Orson Welles’s and Roman Polanski’s Macbeth films, Baz Luhrmann’s, Franco Zeffirelli’s and Gérard Presgurvic’s Romeo and Juliet, Manga Shakespeare, and the Romanian reception of the Bard — the article proposes four classroom applications that use AI tools to build vocabulary and register awareness, oral communication, structured critical comparison, and intercultural creative production, together with safeguards against the overreliance that recent studies identify as generative AI’s chief pedagogical risk.*

Keywords: *generative AI, critical thinking, literary adaptation, Shakespeare*

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1. Introduction

English-language schools and universities have adopted generative AI tools — chatbots, machine-translation engines, writing assistants — faster than pedagogy has developed frameworks for using them critically. A recent qualitative study of Turkish EFL learners and their teachers found that while students overwhelmingly welcomed ChatGPT as what they described as a “human collaborator” for organising ideas and improving language, their teachers responded with ambivalence, worried about



originality, authentic acquisition, and the erosion of critical thinking, and asked for clearer institutional policy, curriculum guidance, and training before they could integrate the tool with confidence (Webb & Şenaydın, 2025). That gap — enthusiastic, under-scaffolded student use, and cautious, under-supported teacher practice — is the starting point of this article.

Much classroom use of AI still treats it as an answer machine: a student asks a question, the tool supplies an answer, and the exchange ends. This risks exactly the passive reception that language teaching has always tried to avoid, because it substitutes acceptance for judgement. Yet the same generative tools, tasked differently, have been shown to strengthen argumentative speaking, encourage revision, and reduce the anxiety that keeps many learners silent in class (Darmawansah et al., 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025; Hapsari & Wu, 2022, as cited in Liu et al., 2025). What separates the two outcomes is not the technology but the task.

This article draws that task design from an unlikely but well-tested source: the author’s own doctoral research into Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations. A body of scholarship built entirely around texts that have been rewritten, translated, staged, filmed, and redrawn for four centuries — with no single version treated as definitively correct — offers a ready-made discipline for handling any output, human or machine-generated, as one version among many rather than as a final answer. The thesis’s central argument was that adaptation is not an inferior copy of an original but, when the term is traced to its Latin root *aptus* (“fit”, “well-suited”), a legitimate act of reconstruction judged on its own terms. This article extends that argument by analogy: AI-assisted language production need not be treated as an inferior shortcut to “real” learning either, provided it is scaffolded as a reconstructive practice in which the learner exercises the same judgement that three centuries of Shakespeare’s adaptors have exercised on his plays. Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence for AI in ELT; Section 3 explains why literary adaptation supplies such productive raw material; Section 4 proposes four classroom applications built from specific examples in the thesis; Section 5 addresses the safeguards teachers need; and Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework: AI in the EFL Classroom

2.1 From novelty to pedagogy: TPACK and SAMR

Kohnke (2025) argues that AI integration in English-language teacher education needs to move past novelty and be guided by established instructional-design frameworks, specifically TPACK (technological pedagogical content knowledge) and SAMR (substitution, augmentation, modification, redefinition). Read together, these frameworks distinguish AI use that merely substitutes for an existing task (a chatbot instead of a dictionary) from AI use that redefines what a task can be — producing an activity that would not have been possible, or not possible for every learner, without the tool. Kohnke’s call for a “critical lens” rather than either uncritical adoption or blanket prohibition frames the design choices made in Section 4 below: each proposed activity is built to sit at the modification or redefinition end of the SAMR scale, using AI to enable comparison, rehearsal, or ideation that a single teacher and a fixed set of print texts could not offer at the same pace or scale.

2.2 The double edge of generative AI for critical thinking

A 2025 systematic review of fifteen empirical studies published between 2022 and 2025 found that generative AI’s effect on critical thinking in EFL settings is genuinely double-edged: roughly two-thirds of the studies reviewed reported a positive effect, and one-third reported a negative one (Liu,



Sihe, & Lu, 2025). On the positive side, AI-supported writing tasks encouraged critical thinking and revision (Lee & Davis, 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025); ChatGPT-assisted methods significantly strengthened argumentative speaking (Darmawansah et al., 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025); and in one study 71.93% of student drafts revised with AI assistance showed evidence of critical-thinking application rather than passive copying (Zhang et al., 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025). On the negative side, the same review reports a documented decline in analytical depth among students who came to rely on generative AI without guidance (Khan, 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025), attributed to over-reliance and the uncritical acceptance of AI-generated content. A separate experimental study of 68 Chinese undergraduates found that a group using ChatGPT-4 over twelve weeks achieved statistically significant gains in oral communication competence over a control group taught conventionally, alongside increasingly positive attitudes toward the technology (Wang, 2025). Taken together, this evidence suggests that what matters for critical thinking is not whether students use generative AI but what they are asked to do with its output — accept it, or interrogate it. The remainder of this article designs tasks around interrogation.

3. Why Adaptation? Literary Adaptation as a Laboratory for Language and Thought

3.1 Adaptation, appropriation, representation: a vocabulary for precision

The doctoral thesis on which this article draws opens by defining three key terms that, in ordinary English usage, are often treated as near-synonyms but that carry sharply different connotations and critical weight: adaptation, appropriation, and representation. Adaptation derives from the Latin *aptus*, originally a positive term meaning fit, vigorous, or well-suited, though its contemporary usage has acquired a diminished, secondary connotation. Appropriation, by contrast, carries a built-in ethical charge: it implies that a personal or financial interest, rather than artistic quality, drives the reworking of a source. Representation is different again — not a moral category at all, but a term describing the transfer of a work from one medium to an entirely different one, as when a play moves from page to stage or screen. For English-language learners at an advanced level, this three-way distinction is an ideal case study in the kind of precise, connotation-sensitive vocabulary that separates competent from advanced academic English, and it is exactly the sort of nuance that a generative AI tool can help students test, generate example sentences for, and probe across registers — provided, as Section 4.1 proposes, that students verify the tool’s suggestions rather than accept them outright.

3.2 The adaptation debate as a model for the AI debate

The thesis’s central case studies make the same point at the level of argument rather than vocabulary. Nahum Tate’s *The History of King Lear*, first staged in 1681, rewrote Shakespeare’s tragedy with a happy ending in which Cordelia and Lear both survive — a change that dominated the London stage for nearly a century and a half and that later critics dismissed as a betrayal of the original. Three centuries later, the Women’s Theatre Group’s *Lear’s Daughters* inverted the emphasis again, removing Lear’s physical presence from the stage altogether to foreground the daughters’ formation and questions of class, ethnicity, and gender. Neither adaptation is “less” Shakespeare in any meaningful sense; each is a different creative response to the expectations, anxieties, and blind spots of its own moment, and the thesis’s broader argument — developed with reference to Linda Hutcheon’s (2013) theory of adaptation — is that ranking an adaptation against its source on a single scale of fidelity misses what the adaptation is actually doing.



The same reasoning applies directly to AI-assisted language work. An essay draft, a translated sentence, or a spoken argument that a student has produced with AI assistance is not automatically of lesser educational value than one produced without it. What determines its worth, exactly as in adaptation theory, is whether the learner has exercised informed judgement over the material — selecting, questioning, revising, and ultimately taking ownership of the result — or has simply accepted what the tool supplied. This reframing is pedagogically useful precisely because it gives teachers and students a shared critical vocabulary, borrowed from four centuries of debate about Shakespeare, for a debate about AI that is barely five years old.

4. Four Classroom Applications

4.1 Language development: register and the limits of translation

The thesis observes that Shakespeare’s English is markedly more lexically compressed than its translations: French, German, Russian, and Chinese renderings of the same lines consistently need more words to express an equivalent idea, and each language’s specific register shapes what survives the crossing and what is “lost in translation.” This observation can be turned directly into a classroom activity, here called the Lost-in-Translation Lab. Students take a short, information-dense passage — a single speech from Lear or Hamlet works well — and use an AI translation tool to render it into a second language the class knows, then translate that version back into English with a second AI pass. Comparing the original with the round-tripped version against three criteria — word count, connotation, and formality — turns an otherwise mechanical AI output into an inductive vocabulary and register lesson: students must explain, in their own English, why a given phrase expanded, contracted, or shifted tone, which builds the precise, comparative vocabulary that advanced learners need and that no single machine translation can teach on its own.

4.2 Communication skills: debate, roleplay, and the AI interlocutor

Building on evidence that structured AI-mediated speaking practice measurably improves oral proficiency (Wang, 2025) and argumentative organisation while reducing speaking anxiety (Darmawansah et al., 2024; Hapsari & Wu, 2022, both as cited in Liu et al., 2025), this application stages a debate called The King Lear Trial. Students are assigned to argue for or against Tate’s happy ending versus the Women’s Theatre Group’s father-absent retelling as the more defensible way to tell Lear’s story, and before the live class debate, each side rehearses its position with a conversational AI acting as a sceptical cross-examiner that raises counter-arguments and follow-up questions on demand — low-stakes practice that would otherwise require one-on-one teacher time. A second activity draws on Othello: The Remix, a hip-hop stage adaptation of Othello performed in an American prison, as a model of shifting the same story into a different sociolect and audience. Students draft, with AI as a brainstorming and rhythm partner, a short “remix” of a scene in a register of their choosing — a news report, a courtroom cross-examination, a social-media thread — and then perform it aloud, developing register flexibility and spoken fluency together.

4.3 Critical thinking: structured comparison and the verification habit

Because the sharpest risk identified in the literature is a decline in analytical depth among students who accept AI output uncritically (Khan, 2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025), this application is built around a mandatory verification step. In Two Macbeths, One Prompt, students ask an AI tool to generate a comparison of Orson Welles’s low-budget 1948 Macbeth and Roman Polanski’s far more



lavish 1971 version — two films the thesis discusses precisely because their radically different resources produced comparably successful results — across dimensions such as setting, fidelity to the text, and audience reception. Students then check every claim in the AI’s comparison against short clips, stills, or their own reading, and must flag anything invented, oversimplified, or unsupported, treating the AI’s synthesis as a first hypothesis rather than a verdict. The same structure extends to *Romeo and Juliet*, comparing Baz Luhrmann’s gang-war Verona Beach setting, Franco Zeffirelli’s more text-faithful film (which nonetheless cut Juliet’s potion speech as a pacing decision), and Gérard Presgurvic’s French sung-through musical — three different media treatments of one plot that force students to decide, in their own words, whether textual fidelity is even the right measure of a successful adaptation, directly echoing the thesis’s own conclusion that it is not. The verification habit itself — checking any AI claim against a primary source before accepting it — is the transferable skill, and it mirrors the discipline the doctoral research exercises by returning constantly to the primary texts and to named critics such as Bristol (1996), Kermode (2000), and Elsom (2004) rather than accepting any single received opinion about what Shakespeare means.

4.4 Creative and intercultural competence: rewriting Shakespeare today

The thesis’s discussion of graphic representation — Manga Shakespeare, which redrew the plays in a Japanese-influenced visual idiom to reach teenage readers, and paintings by Delacroix, Waterhouse, and Ford Madox Brown that translated dramatic scenes into a still older visual medium — together with its addendum on the Romanian reception of Shakespeare, including Mihai Eminescu’s poetic engagement with the plays and Silviu Purcărete’s original stage productions, supplies the material for a culminating task called the Adaptation Pitch. In small groups, students choose a Shakespeare plot and pitch, first in writing and then in an oral defence, an adaptation set in their own culture or a culture they are studying, using AI as a brainstorming partner for setting, character updates, and staging ideas — the same creative move Manga Shakespeare and Purcărete each made for their own audiences. Crucially, students must justify their choices using the critical vocabulary introduced in Section 3.1, arguing explicitly why their version counts as an adaptation rather than a superficial appropriation. Combining creative writing, oral presentation, intercultural awareness, and applied critical vocabulary, this is a redefinition-level task in SAMR terms: it could not be attempted with the same range or speed of ideation without AI support, while the justification stage keeps the thinking with the student rather than the tool.

5. Safeguards: Teaching AI Literacy Alongside English

Webb and Şenaydın (2025) identify four concrete needs that EFL teachers report when integrating generative AI: clear institutional policy on acceptable use, curriculum guidance on task-specific competencies and prompt-crafting, transparent assessment criteria for AI-assisted work, and professional development to build teachers’ own AI literacy. Translated into classroom practice, four safeguards follow directly from the activities above. First, every AI-generated output used in class should be paired with a mandatory verification or sourcing step, as in Section 4.3, so that acceptance is never the default response to a machine-generated claim. Second, prompt-crafting should be taught explicitly as a genre of academic English — precise, revisable, and criterion-driven — rather than left for students to discover by trial and error. Third, assessment should weigh the student’s judgement and revision of AI output rather than only the polish of the final text, for instance through a short annotated process log noting what the AI produced, what the student changed, and why. Fourth, teachers should deliberately rotate which skills AI is permitted to assist — translation one



week, brainstorming the next — so that learners continue to practise unassisted production regularly, directly answering the overreliance risk that both Khan (2024, as cited in Liu et al., 2025) and the teachers interviewed by Webb and Şenaydın (2025) identify as generative AI’s chief pedagogical danger.

6. Conclusion

The doctoral research at the centre of this article set out to show that a Shakespearean adaptation is not inferior simply because it depends on a prior text; what determines its worth is the quality of judgement, contextual awareness, and originality brought to the act of reconstruction. This article has argued that the same standard, transposed, offers English teachers a workable and already well-tested answer to the anxieties surrounding generative AI in the classroom. An AI-assisted translation, argument, or draft is not inferior merely because a machine helped produce it; what determines its educational value is whether the student has exercised the same kind of judgement — selecting, verifying, revising, and defending — that three centuries of Shakespeare’s adaptors have exercised on his plays, from Nahum Tate’s happy-ending *Lear* to a hip-hop *Othello* performed behind prison walls. Literary adaptation, precisely because it has spent centuries refusing the false choice between “original” and “derivative,” offers an unusually well-tested set of habits of mind for the AI classroom: read closely, compare deliberately, verify before accepting, and take ownership of what is finally produced. Teaching English with AI, approached in this way, is not a departure from the humanities classroom but a continuation of exactly the kind of critical, comparative reading that the study of Shakespeare’s afterlives has always demanded — developing language, communication, and critical thinking not despite the presence of AI, but through the deliberate, disciplined use of it.



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