【Research Brief】

Drawing the Line: Integrating Kialo to Deepen Critical Thinking in Debate

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Abstract

This study reflects on using the online debate site Kialo as a supplementary tool to elicit students' opinions about various debate topics. In total, 118 students took part in the study. A mixed methods approach was utilized to collect both qualitative and quantitative data in the form of class notes and a Google Form, respectively. In general, students gave positive impressions about using Kialo, suggesting that it helped improve the content of their debates, their critical thinking skills, and their written English. Results from this study suggest that integrating the Kialo platform into the debate class syllabus increased students' participation and satisfaction from the course. In future, Kialo could be integrated into other English classes as a means of a) a reflective tool, b) a place for students to brainstorm ideas about projects and discussions, and c) a platform to help the students achieve their course goals.

Keywords: *Kialo, critical thinking, debate*

INTRODUCTION

The English debate module is a 14-week course taken by all first-year students at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. This module has been mandatory since 2020, with the primary goals being to (i) understand the nature and structures of debate in English, (ii) to develop students' critical thinking skills by analyzing and formulating arguments on issues from multiple perspectives, and (iii) to help students learn how to respond to questions through the development of research skills (Debate Committee, 2020). Students are expected to learn to practice and use the academic skills that they study in discussion, reading, writing, and presentation classes in a social setting. They are also required to engage in critical thinking and logical thinking and improve listening, research, and team building skills (Debate Committee, 2020).

English debate classes present students with a chance to communicate using academic English in a structured manner. In contrast to merely absorbing information, debate demands that students actively apply information in a meaningful way (Kennedy, 2007). All four of the English skills are practiced when debating in EFL (English as a Foreign Language), as well as providing an opportunity to practice language skills in an authentic situation (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013). Good debate requires higher order critical thinking skills and offers an opportunity for students to move beyond the acquisition of primitive knowledge in a subject matter (Elliot, 1993). Due to the fluid nature of debate with the turn taking between teams, it is unfeasible to completely prepare for a debate. Therefore, spontaneous use of English by students is advantageous in that it aids in building in tandem both oral communication and critical thinking skills (Combs & Bourne, 1994). Classroom debates authorize students to cooperate with one another while searching for information, which enhances their interactive learning and their reasoning ability (Ebata, 2009; Zare & Othma, 2013), and the competitive nature of debate activities also helps develop teamwork skills and cooperation (Williams et al., 2001). Practicing academic debate in university classes could thus be seen as preparing students to speak in English in meaningful real-life situations, alongside improving their language

and presentation skills in conjunction with cooperative skills.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of using the website Kialo to help boost students' critical thinking skills and practice for their speaking debates. By using the site, students would be able to see the other side's arguments and challenge them, while also honing their ideas and debate skills for the forthcoming speaking debates. Woodward and Padfield (2021) have indicated that using Kialo for debate classes had a positive impact on team collaboration, creative thought, and debate performance. Additionally, Mahoney (2021) found that providing asynchronous discussion boards for students to express their ideas prior to discussion classes gave students the opportunity to practice and refine their ideas and to think more deeply about the discussion topics, which led to the enrichment of in-class discussions. By using Kialo in a similar fashion, the author is aspiring for analogous results in debate class.

KIALO

Kialo is an online debating platform that helps people take part in thoughtful discussion, appreciate different points of view, and assist with collaborative decision making (Kialo, 2020). This portal increases students' critical thinking by making them face opposing views and re-examining their own. They must also ensure that their arguments are well researched and provide reliable evidence. The moderator (or teacher) creates a proposition that participants (students) can either make a support claim (pro) or an attack claim (con). These claims show visual reasoning through a tree-based structure. Participants can also ask follow-up questions to each claim for extra evidence or clarification. This enables a detailed exploration of some claims, in addition to the main thesis topic (Chaudoin et al., 2017).

Figure 1
Kialo argument tree

Note. Tree depiction of a Kialo debate with a single thesis. Green designates pro arguments and red designates con arguments.

PROCEDURE

Each class consisted of approximately 20 students, with each student placed into classes with other students of a similar English competence. One class was level 1, with students who all scored a combined TOEIC listening and reading score of over 680 (CEFR B2 and above), two were level 2 classes with average TOEIC scores of 480–679 (CEFR B1-B2), and three level 3 classes with average scores of 280–479 (CEFR A2-B1). Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the semester began with online classes with each class 100 minutes in duration. From lesson five, classes were changed to a conventional face-to-face format. In the classroom, students were organized into groups of four or five, with each team color-coded and given an affirmative or negative side to argue from. Seating charts were created for each lesson beforehand to ensure that students sat next to different classmates in the next lesson.

In the first lesson of the term, students received a 40-minute explanation about Kialo, which

included a 5-minute YouTube video. After this, students registered their own accounts. Students were advised to use their real names, so that their posts and replies could be identified easily. Each Kialo group was named the same as the class code of the class (for example, FT505), and then students received a link that would allow them to join each Kialo group. In this way, only students who were members of the Kialo group, or those who were invited to join the Kialo debates via the link, could gain access and participate in the Kialo debates. Students were informed that participation in Kialo was a weekly homework, which would amount to 10% of their overall grade in the debate class, and that the more they participated and asked questions, the higher this score would be.

The first topic, "Junk food should be banned on all campuses" was chosen as it was a relatively simple proposition and something that students could easily relate to. The second topic "Eating less meat is a good way to be eco-friendly" was chosen as it was also food-related and followed the suggested themes of the textbook. New propositions were posited weekly throughout the semester on topics that were related to the themes of textbook: food, the environment, technology, gender, and the media. In the early debates, many students read debate arguments from their mobile phones, and some read directly from the Kialo debates during face-to-face discussions. Students were advised that this was not suitable and that they needed to write their claims on Post-it Notes or on folded paper, as well as to have good body language when making their arguments to the other team. From around lesson seven, the higher-level students were advised to avoid putting their strongest arguments on Kialo and save them for the speaking debate to surprise the other team with a powerful piece of evidence. The students immediately understood and followed this instruction until the end of term.

In later lessons, students were allowed to write their own propositions on Kialo. For the final debate test, the students were asked to propose topics of their choice on Kialo, and then they were allowed to vote for their favorite topics, with the most popular choice being selected as the final debate test propositions. The students produced a rich variety of propositions ranging from topics such as "The existence of aliens" to "Zoos and aquariums should be banned." It was found that giving the students the power to create and vote for their own topics was both motivating and rewarding.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Student participation

In total, the participating students (n= 118) made 1873 contributions (claims & replies), which is an average of 15.9 contributions per student. Six students (5%) made 0–5 contributions, while nineteen students (16%) made 60 contributions. Forty-five students (38%) made 11–15 contributions, and twenty-three students (19%) made 16–20 contributions. Sixteen students (14%) made 21–25 contributions, and five students (4%) made between 26–30 contributions. Four students (3%) made between 41–45 contributions, and one student made between 51–55 contributions. A total of 1328 (posted and completed) claims were made by the students. Nine students (8%) made 0–5 claims, while thirty-four students (29%) made 6–10 claims. Fifty-three students (45%) made 11–15 claims, and sixteen students (14%) made 16–20 claims. Six students (5%) made 21–25 claims. A total of twenty-six posts were deleted. All these deleted posts took place in the first three debates, suggesting that students were making mistakes more often earlier in the semester when they had just started using the platform.

Topics

The most popular topic that students participated in with 219 contributions was in week nine, with “Debate topics.” In this week, two different debate topics from the textbook were posited: “The benefits of social media are greater than the risks” and “Playing video games causes violent behaviour.” The fact that lesson nine was a test was perhaps a major factor for participation in this week to be the greatest, along with the two relatable topics for students. Week four (“Everyone should purchase an electric car”) was the second most popular topic with 213 contributions. Weeks two and three (“Junk food should be banned on all campuses” /“Eating less meat is a good way to be eco-friendly”) were popular topics with 193 contributions each. As car manufacturing is a main industry in Japan, it could have figured in the popularity of week four. Weeks two and three may have been popular as these took place early in the term so students’ motivation may have been high, and the topics are food-related, which is a topic that students tend to enjoy discussing. The least popular topics were in weeks 13 and 14 (“Final debate topics”/“Kialo is a useful tool for debate class”), with 84 and 96 contributions. respectively. This drop off may well be attributed to the fact that the final two classes took place after the winter holiday, and students’ motivation may have focused more on the final speaking debate, which took place in week 13.

Equal participation

Of the 87 female students, a total of 1358 contributions were made (16.6 per student), and 962 claims (11.1 per student) were made. Out of the 31 male students in the study, a total of 515 contributions were made (16.6 per student) and 366 claims were made (11.8 per student). These figures would suggest that participation between genders was almost on par.

Advantages

In the final class of the term, students were asked to complete a Google Form, in which the final question was open-ended asking students to leave any positive or negative comments about using Kialo. This same question was also posed as the final Kialo topic. In a combined total of the Google Form and Kialo debate, 20 different advantages were identified by the students. The most common was that Kialo was useful for the class (78 comments). The second most popular advantage given (43 comments) was that Kialo deepened the debate and was motivating. The third most common advantage (25 comments) was that the platform was easy to use and kept track of everyone’s opinions. Below are some of the positive comments made:

Using Kialo helped me cultivate a critical perspective.
Being able to see other people’s opinions helped change my inflexible mind.
I could improve my critical thinking skills by researching deeply and seeing different sides to an argument.
If I entered the Kialo debate late, it was difficult to come up with other ideas, so I had to research deeply.
It was useful to check anytime and helped me to think of rebuttals.
It was easy to use and a good place to practice before the class.

Students were also asked to agree or disagree on a Likert scale with a series of statements in the Google Form. For the statement "Using Kialo helped improve my debate and critical thinking skills," 82% (n= 84) of students agreed that it had helped improve them. Only 5% of students disagreed with this statement, clearly indicating that using Kialo had been very beneficial to most students' debate and critical thinking skills. For the statement "Seeing people's ideas on two opposing sides helped deepen my understanding of the debate topics," 87% (n=89) of students agreed with this. Having a clear line between pros and cons and therefore separating two sides of an argument helped students to carve their stance internally on each topic. 82% (n=84) of students agreed with the statement "It was useful to practice my debate arguments on Kialo before the speaking debates." The feedback suggests that it was especially useful for the lower students to practice, who often used the same ideas on Kialo in the speaking debates.

Disadvantages

A total of seven different disadvantages were indicated on the one Google Form open-ended question and final Kialo debate. The most common disadvantages given was the 500-word limit for each post (12 students). The second most common disadvantage was trouble with using the site or PC (seven students). This may partly be due to that fact that the Kialo platform added new features during the term, and these changes were not clearly explained. Six students from the level 1 class expressed that being able to see the other team's ideas was detrimental to the speaking debates. These views were also expressed in the final class when students discussed the question "What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Kialo?" Below are some of the negative comments made:

I think that seeing the other team's ideas before is cheating. It is good to prepare, but our opinion can be copied and stolen. This makes the debates superficial.
It is not good to know the opposite opinion before the debate. It should be a secret. We should keep the important data for the speaking debate.
I cannot use my Kialo opinion in the speaking debate because the other team can make rebuttals easily.
The 500-word limitation is not good. I wanted to express my opinions in more detail.

Although students were reminded to participate at the end of each lesson, and good examples of their arguments were highlighted in class, five students mentioned that it was easy to forget. Although the platform was embedded on the students' class homepage on BlackBoard and a direct link to each debate was shared for weekly feedback, class feedback and the BlackBoard class homepage may have been largely ignored by some students.

Differences in perception

There was a clear difference in how the higher-level students of this course perceived the usage of Kialo compared with those of a lower level. It was notable that students who were placed in the level 1 class (TOEIC scores of over 680) and high level 2 classes (TOEIC scores of 480–679) stressed that they wanted to keep their opinions confidential, to have more authentic debates. These high-level students also wanted extended word limits, so they were far more enthusiastic. Most of the level 3 students (TOEIC scores of 280–479) mentioned that it was hard to find new ideas if they did not

post an opinion early in the debate. The level 3 students also indicated that seeing the ideas before was more beneficial to them. The level 3 students tended to use the same ideas on Kialo in the speaking debate, whereas the higher levels did not. These findings would seem to suggest that in future usage of this platform, the unique needs of each class will need to be considered more carefully, and debates should be arranged according to the proficiency in English of each class.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the use of Kialo in a debate class and has considered the possible permutations for its continued usage. To concur with Matsumoto (2021, p.171) who claims that "Technologies like smartphones seem to have the potential to expand L2 learners' choices and agency for learning," the implementation of the Kialo platform into the debate course has aided students in the attainment of these skills. By giving students a week to research about the forthcoming topic of the speaking debate, students were able to delve deeply into the topics and become more flexible in their way of thinking. The use of Kialo falls in line with what Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008) refer to as "the motivation orientation of language teaching (MOLT)." MOLT identified 25 motivational practices used by teachers in 27 countries (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), which included primarily (i) teacher discourse to arouse student curiosity, which would involve choosing appropriate topics and introducing them (ii) participation structure, such as group work or pair work (iii) activity design, which would refer to team competition, and (iv) encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation and activity design, which refers to the positive feedback given to students on Kialo or at the start of each class. Overall, student participation on Kialo was active, and most students did more than what was required of them to earn participation points in their score, suggesting that the platform pushed the students to participate in a variety of ways. Since all the participants owned a smartphone, they could comfortably access the site.

As argued in this paper, it is important that when using Kialo, the teacher should tailor the usage of the platform to the needs of each class and, depending on the English competence of each class should offer students pedagogical guidance. By augmenting Kialo as part of their course, teachers may be able to a) facilitate students' critical thinking skills, b) assist students in the planning and output of their face-to-face debates, and c) authorize improvement in students' motivation. From the findings of this study, it could be argued that Kialo was a useful tool and is a project that will continue to grow organically in the age of information. Further research could also be conducted in more general English classes, and not only in just debate classes, as the platform is malleable and could be used to boost critical thinking skills in various English classes, such as English presentation, discussion, or reading and writing classes. It may be potentially used as a reflective tool, as a platform for students to collectively brainstorm ideas for forthcoming classes, or as a means of providing peer-feedback.

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Appendix
Student Survey

1. Using Kialo helped improve my critical thinking skills
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

2. It was useful to practice my debate arguments on Kialo before the speaking debates
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

3. Seeing people's ideas on two opposing sides helped deepen my understanding of the debate topics
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

4. Using Kialo motivated me to research deeply for the team debates
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

5. Using Kialo was troublesome and not useful for debates
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

6. It was difficult to begin the Kialo debates
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

7. I felt unhappy if someone disagreed with me on Kialo
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

8. Using Kialo did not help my understanding of debate structures and flow
   Strongly Agree　Agree　Neutral　Disagree　Strongly Disagree

9. Please write any positive or negative comments about using Kialo here