# Roundtable Discussion in Language Teaching: Assessing Subject Knowledge and Language Skills

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Roundtable discussions have been effectively used for educational purposes for years. However, being widely used in an academic environment as a tool for education, roundtable discussions remain under-investigated as a form of summative and formative assessment. The purpose of this research was to determine the efficiency of a roundtable discussion to evaluate subject knowledge and to test EFL/ESL proficiency level both during the classroom assessment and final examination. To use a roundtable discussion as an objective assessment tool, clear criteria were developed. They included but were not limited to scoring the task completion, macro and micro skills in speaking and language components, which were assessed according to the CEFR descriptor bands appropriate to the students' level of learning. Being crucial to the development of general communicative competence, macro and micro skills in speaking were also taken into account during the assessment stage. Results of the research showed that roundtable discussions were clearly advantageous to face-to-face interviews in honing general academic skills, assessing subject knowledge of the course and students' EFL/ESL language skills. This suggests that the use of roundtable discussions can be recommended as a form of summative and formative assessment.

*Keywords*: roundtable discussion, macro- and micro skills in speaking, evaluation criteria, summative and formative assessment, CEFR, EFL/ESL, communicative competence

The aim of this article is to provide an example of the use of a roundtable discussion (RTD) as an effective assessment tool. Not only are roundtable discussions highly relevant to tertiary education programmes where they are used in a variety of subjects to raise questions and share views on dubious issues, but they are also an effective and efficient means of assessment.

Nowadays more and more schools in Russia and all over the world rely on the standardised testing as the most objective assessment tool. They assess knowledge with a test and as a consequence start teaching to the test which, in its turn, leads to a vicious circle. There is no place for variety and critical thinking in "teaching to the test" methodology. There is no doubt that students tend to pay more attention and devote more time to a particular subject or issue if they know that what they do is closely connected with an exam. However positive as it may seem, testing shouldn't be the only technique in education and assessment.

Language testing today is mostly associated with the assessment of listening, writing and reading skills; nevertheless, it is also widely used in speaking evaluation. Standardised face-to-face exams imply the use of a prompt, either written or visual, by a candidate and a set of criteria to be used by an examiner. Without doubts a student might be trained to answer successfully nearly any question by juggling the information given in the prompt and a number of clichés and set phrases learned by heart. Such examinations will reflect neither the true depth of a candidate's knowledge nor his/her language proficiency level. This situation might change if we combine different types of evaluation incorporating new forms to summative and formative assessment e.g., forms of alternative assessment.

According to Brown and Hudson (1998), teachers

have always used various forms of assessment in the classroom, and such alternatives in assessment as portfolios, conferences, diaries, self-assessments, etc. are just new developments in that long tradition. By all odds, there are many academic works dedicated to standardised and alternative assessment (Buhagiar, 2007; Sandrarajun, Kiely, 2009; Brown, 1998; Walvoord, 1998; Bachman, 2002; Richards and Renandya, 2011; Jacobs, 2001; etc.), but only a few of them touch upon the issue of the use of particular forms of alternative assessment as a substitute to standardised exams (Tatter, 2012) and none of them explores the use of roundtable discussions as an alternative to summative and formative assessment both in subject matters and ELT.

Preliminary research has shown that there are some institutions where alternative assessment is widely used. For instance, there is a consortium of public high schools in the US which allows their students not to sit traditional exams but to be assessed on the ground of a portfolio review (Tatter, 2012). However, even though some of them use roundtable discussions as a part of this portfolio, they do not intend it to substitute assessment or to test students' knowledge of specific facts (Sokoloff-Rubin, 2013; Maio, 2002).

This article, in its turn, argues that a roundtable discussion might be used as an effective tool of summative and formative assessment which allows both to assess subject knowledge and to test students' EFL proficiency level. Moreover, not only does a roundtable discussion enable to evaluate students' subject knowledge of the course material and their foreign language skills, but it also prepares students for their further academic and professional life. This article will look into both theoretical base of the use of RTD and will provide a detailed plan of the roundtable discussion and evaluation criteria.

#### **Alternative assessment**

Alternative assessment includes, but is not limited to such tasks as journals, logs, audio- and videotaping, self-evaluation (Huerta-Macias, 1995), portfolios and projects (Dikli, 2003; Padilla, 1996; Short, 1993; Nunes, 2004). Two major concepts are associated with alternative assessment: authentic assessment (Lewkowicz, 2000; Wu and Stansfield, 2001; Joy, 2011; Aksu Atac, 2012, Wiggins, 1998) and portfolio assessment (Reeves, 2000; Padilla, 1996; Short, 1993; Nunes, 2004). Portfolio assessment involves evaluation of a collection of student works created with a particular aim at hand, whereas, authentic assessment aims at evaluation of a student's general performance level in a task which reflects a real world issue (Elliott, 1995). This is what makes alternative assessment meaningful, as the skills acquired, developed or evaluated through it are the ones that urge students to use higher order thinking skills needed in real-life (Nasab, 2015). So, what makes alternative assessment truly alternative?

There is a set of common characteristics provided by different researchers (Aschbacher, 1991; Herman, Aschbacher and Winters, 1992; Huerta-Macias, 1995; Brown and Hudson, 1998; Short, 1991; Crandall, 1987; Semple, 1992). In their view, alternative assessment requires students to create, perform or produce something; focuses on both a process and a result; involves authentic or semi-authentic task types; taps into higher level problem-solving and critical thinking skills; evaluates skills needed in real life; is multiculturally sensitive when administered in a proper way; ensures that the scoring is administered by people, not automatically; encourages transparent set of scoring criteria available to both teachers and students well in advance; and motivates teachers to perform new instructional and assessment roles.

Talking about the use of alternative assessment in language teaching, it should be noted that it aims at the integrative evaluation of such skills as listening for detail: i.e., ability to listen to the required information and understand it; organising a large unit of oral discourse, using various oral techniques (describe, compare, express personal opinion, speculate); involving an interlocutor in a conversation and keeping the ball of the conversation rolling; expressing ideas, giving personal opinion, expanding and supporting it with relevant examples; and jotting down keywords, sequencing ideas and talking on the subject using the notes made.

Taking into consideration all of the above, the following forms of oral communication, which are widely used in language teaching in an academic environment, fit into the category of alternative assessment: roundtable discussions, debates, oral presentations, conference talks and roleplays.

Talking about the strengths of alternative assessment (as stated above) it is worth mentioning some disadvantages typically associated with it. For example, all the material should be profoundly studied both by the student and the teacher; enough time should be allocated for the assessment; if more than 8 people are to be assessed 2 or more examiners are required; raters should be properly trained; strict and transparent assessment criteria are crucial for objective scoring; moreover, the use of alternative assessment task types as a form of summative and formative assessment is generally considered as nonstandardised.

Yet, these disadvantages are typical of all forms of assessment, notwithstanding its form. It takes time and labor to design valid materials which will document attainment of students' learning outcomes. The ratings might be subjective if raters are not trained and/or strict rating rubrics are not used. To be administered properly they require time and efficient coordination. Moreover, they are vulnerable to student cheating.

In a nutshell, given that various assessment types have similar drawbacks, the use of RTD as a form of formative (classroom assessment, mid-term assessment) and summative (final examination) might be justified.

#### Method

#### **Research background**

Before considering the use of RTD exam itself, it is necessary to give an overview of the teaching context in which it was initially created and used. The author has been engaged in teaching the British Studies CLIL course for more than five years to the first and third year students at the Lomonosov Moscow State University (MSU) and to bachelor (BA) and master (MA) students at National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). After graduation, MSU BA students were supposed to work as translators, interpreters, and/or specialists in cross-cultural communication and HSE BA and MA students were getting ready to become teachers of English. The British-studies course itself was designed to assist both categories of students with subject knowledge about the country and the language needed both for their BA and MA studies and their future professional life. Considering the fact that in real life most of the issues are usually discussed and solved during the roundtable discussions, it seemed instrumental to give students an input on RTD and numerous opportunities to practise it throughout the course instead of using a far-from-real-world form of assessment.

For the purpose of this study, data was collected from 90 students all together: 50 students at MSU and 40 at HSE.

# Traditional approach to formative and summative assessment

Today in Russia, two forms of summative and formative assessment co-exist. The first one is an oral test or exam with question cards (an interview type personal-response assessment), and the second one is a written test with selected-response questions and, sometimes, with constructed-response questions. Tests and essays are more common in language courses while oral exams, the interview type (faceto-face with an examiner), are widely used in all the humanities subjects.

#### The roundtable assessment procedure

The roundtable procedure is different. Students are examined simultaneously in groups (up to 15 people). They are required to give a 2-3 minute presentation of their positions, which is followed by a 3-4 minute question phase when students have to defend their positions by providing further evidence and arguments to support them. This is done to provide students with the insight into the world of real professional RTDs. Two examiners are present: the interlocutor, who is responsible for the timing of the exam and for interaction, and the assessor, who completes the score sheet. The interlocutor role is essential because when there are more than 3 people in a group a personality becomes an issue and the interlocutor should monitor the time and make sure that every participant has an opportunity to speak<sup>1</sup>.

# Roundtables in summative and formative assessment

Throughout the course, RTDs were used both as a summative and a formative assessment tool. The main difference was in the width of the subject knowledge tested, speaking micro- and macro skills evaluated (e.g. ability to express ideas, ability to ask and answer questions, ability to weigh advantages and disadvantages, ability to speculate about causes and consequences) and RTD timing, as shown in Table 1.

An RTD as classroom assessment was used mostly to discuss historical questions and took not more than 20 minutes. The main emphasis was made on the assessment of the understanding of key concepts devoted to one theme and the development of particular micro skills in speaking. Students based their answers on the material presented in the course book chapter. Students' participation was not compulsory; no extra preparation, apart from reading a chapter of the course book, was required.

As a midterm assessment, the RTD was used to discuss an issue which linked more than two themes; for example, the role of Henry VIII's reforms in Britain then and now. To take part in the RTD students had to find information relevant to their role. During the RTD, they had to speak as if they were a real historical person: Henry VIII, or a member of Parliament, or a merchant or a member of the gentry, etc. Their answer was based on the course book chapters and on the analysis of other historical materials. Students could choose a person they wanted to represent. Roles and RTD theme were known four weeks in advance, so students had time to prepare for the assessment. The emphasis was on the subject knowledge but more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> If RTD is used as a classroom assessment tool then the interlocutor role should be given to one of the students.

|                                |                                 | Classroom assessment               | Midterm assessment                                   | <b>Final examination</b>  |  |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Problem / Issue                |                                 | A problem / issue inside one theme | A problem / issue, linking more than two themes      | All themes covered during the course                                  |  |
| Theme                          | Known / Unknown prior to<br>RTD | Unknown                            | Known  | Known   |  |
|                                | Participation                   | Not obligatory                     | Obligatory   | Obligatory  |  |
|                                | Role                            | Personal opinion expressed         | Specific historical person                           | General role (e.g., educator, politician)                             |  |
| Roles                          | Distribution                    | N/a                                | Might be chosen by a student                         | Assigned randomly   |  |
|                                | Known / unknown prior to RTD    | N/a                                | Known  | Unknown   |  |
| Supporting material            |                                 | Course book chapter                | Course book chapter/s, additional sources            | Course book, additional sources                                       |  |
| Macro- and micro skills tested |                                 | A few micro skills                 | A number of micro skills and<br>/ or one macro skill | All backbone micro skills<br>in speaking, a number of<br>macro skills |  |
| Subject knowledge tested       |                                 | An issue on one topic/theme        | One / two themes                                     | All themes covered during the course                                  |  |
| Prior preparation              |                                 | Not required                       | Required   | Required  |  |
| Timing                         |                                 | 20 minutes                         | 60 minutes   | 90-120 minutes  |  |

| Table 1              |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| RTD in summative and | formative assessment |

micro skills and even a number of macro skills in speaking were assessed.

A roundtable was also used as a final examination and aimed mostly at assessment and evaluation of the subject knowledge covered during the course together with speaking skills. It lasted 90 minutes and 15 students participated in RTD. This time was enough for each of them both to share their own point of view and to ask questions to other participants. The RTD theme was known in advance but the roles were assigned randomly at the beginning of the examination. Students had to present an opinion of the person, connected with a particular field: i.e., politics, education, food and drinks, transport and so on. No written follow-up task was given this time.

#### Measures

To make RTD a real objective assessment tool and use it as an alternative to an oral examination with question cards it was crucial to develop clear criteria. Table 2 shows the score chart that was used throughout the course.

In respect of the task, separate marks were given for the task understanding and compliance with the role given. As for the content, students were assessed on their ability to defend their own point of view providing arguments, supported by facts and references to authorities, without unnecessary repetitions. They also had to interact with other participants by asking and answering questions. Students' general presentation style was also evaluated.

## Table 2

| t |
|---|
|   |

| Criteria                       | Classroom<br>assessment | Midterm<br>assessment | Final examination |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Task                           | 15 %                    | 20 %                  | 20 %              |
| Content                        | 25%                     | 30 %                  | 30 %              |
| Participation and presentation | 25%                     | 20 %                  | 20 %              |
| Language<br>components         | 15 %                    | 30 %                  | 30 %              |
| Follow-up writing<br>task      | 20%                     | n/a                   | n/a               |

For the assessment of the language components (grammar and vocabulary), CEFR descriptor bands appropriate to the students' level of learning were used, and both range and accuracy were taken into account.

The weighting was calculated on the basis of points assigned for particular criterion and divided by the total number of grade points: 27 and 22 points respectfully for classroom assessment and midterm assessment / final examination. The total number of grade points varied, as the follow-up writing task was not used during the midterm assessment and final examination. The detailed score chart used throughout the course is shown in Table 3.

As it was a CLIL course, the RTD was used for the assessment of subject knowledge and language proficiency. So a number of micro- and macro skills in speaking were also evaluated and a separate score chart was used for classroom, mid-term and final

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## Table 3

Roundtable score chart

| Criteria  | Points   |                 | Max      | Comments |          |
|---|----------|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|
|   | 0        | 1               | 2        | IVIAN    | comments |
| TASK  |          |                 |          | Max 4    |          |
| Task understanding                                | No       | Not<br>entirely | Yes      |          |          |
| Compliance with the role                          | No       | Not<br>entirely | Yes      |          |          |
| CONTENT   |          |                 |          | Max 7    |          |
| evel/quality of the information given             |          |                 |          | Max 3    |          |
| Number of references to authorities               | No       | Yes (1-2)       | Yes (>2) |          |          |
| Personal opinion                                  | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| Arguments: use of facts and support n             | naterial |                 |          | Max 4    |          |
| Number of arguments                               | No       | Yes (1-2)       | Yes (>2) |          |          |
| Repetitions                                       | - ]      | 1 if there are  | any      |          |          |
| Answering questions (defending personal position) | No       | Yes (1-2)       | Yes (>2) |          |          |
| PRESENTATION AND PARTICIPAT                       | ION      |                 |          | Max 7    |          |
| Presentation style                                |          |                 |          | Max 4    |          |
| Logic   | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| Clarity and perspicuity                           | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| nterest of the audience                           | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| nteraction with the audience                      | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| Questions to other participants                   | 5        |                 |          | Max 3    |          |
| Number of questions                               | No       | Yes (1-2)       | Yes (>2) |          |          |
| Repetitions                                       | - ]      | 1 if there are  | any      |          |          |
| Different participants were asked                 | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| LANGUAGE COMPONENTS                               |          |                 |          | Max 4    |          |
| /ocabulary  | >B2      | B2              |          |          |          |
| Grammar   | >B2      | B2              |          |          |          |
| Micro- and macro skills in speaking               | No       | Not<br>entirely | Yes      |          |          |
| FOLLOW-UP WRITING TASK                            |          |                 |          | Max 5    |          |
| Structure   | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| logic   | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| Compliance with the role                          | No       | Yes             |          |          |          |
| Vocabulary  | >B2      | B2              |          |          |          |
| Grammar   | >B2      | B2              |          |          |          |
| TOTAL   |          |                 |          | Max 27   |          |

assessment. They varied from classroom assessment to final examination but were known to students prior to RTDs. Among those evaluated were the 10 backbone microskills in speaking which underlay the majority of macroskills and are crucial for the development of general communicative skills (Rodomanchenko, 2014), such as, ability to express ideas, ability to provide relevant explanations, ability to express an opinion, ability to weigh advantages and disadvantages, ability to speculate about causes and consequences, ability to summarize given information, ability to answer questions, ability to report back to what was said to confirm or reject, ability to handle interjections, and ability to use appropriate register.

Apart from the discussion itself, students were asked to complete a follow-up writing task, which included an overview of what they presented during the RTD. This overview was published on the course page on wikispaces.com and was evaluated both by the teacher and peers. Because of the written task itself and the strict rating rubrics, students changed tactics while preparing for RTD. At the beginning of the course, they participated in RTD with a pile of unstructured printed material from the Internet in front of them. It negatively influenced the structure of their oral speech and later led to a very time-consuming writing task. Having analysed written overviews published by their peers on the wiki, students devoted more time to the analysis of resources: they started highlighting arguments and counterarguments, the most important and the least important; they began structuring their oral presentation beforehand. All in all, this written task had a very positive effect both on oral and written presentations and a reduction in the preparation time.

#### The students' opinions

After the RTD exam, 90 students were asked to provide feedback on the use of RTD in the classroom by answering the following questions:

- 1. In your opinion, is RTD an alternative to a traditional oral examination? (yes/no) (as shown in figure 1)
- 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of RTD examination? (short answer) (as shown in figure 2)

Students also had an opportunity to comment on the use of RTD. The results of the questionnaire are presented in the Figures 1 and 2 together with the most vivid comments given below.

### Students' feedback

Students offered feedback on various aspects of roundtable discussion. The quotes below represent them.

"This type of assessment is optimal for the acquisition of an oral model of a foreign language."

"I think that RTD might be effectively used as an exam because it:

- reduces general stress level;
- gives an opportunity to show my knowledge in many areas;
- is just an interesting form of communication;
- allows to share my personal point of view."

"I think that RTD is an effective form of assessment. To prepare for an exam I had to review all the material covered during the year as if I was preparing for an ordinary exam with question cards. However, the RTD form itself is unusual and comfortable. First of all, during such kind of exam students worry less. I personally wasn't stressed at all. Secondly, we had an opportunity to discuss a topic, which is important for the development of a person as a whole, share our personal point of view and listen to the opinion of others. The last, but not the least, it was very useful



*Figure 1.* Is RTD an alternative to a traditional oral examination?



*Figure 2*. The advantages and disadvantages of an RTD examination.

as I think that during this exam, just in 90 minutes we acquired and honed skills that we will definitely use in future."

"I think that RTD is the best form of an exam. When we have exams with question cards, it is impossible to show all that we've learned during the course, because when we get a question card we have to speak on one, rarely two themes, which are sometimes our weakest ones. RTD shows all breadth of knowledge as a teacher may see that a student knows the topic not only when he/she is talking on behalf of his/her role, but during the question stage or general discussion as well. Moreover, students are not that frustrated and stressed as they are during the normal exam. Moreover, students may argue and even debate with other RTD participants, which is a big plus. It'd be really good if we had such types of exams in all our courses."

### **Results and Discussion**

In a nutshell, roundtable discussions might be an alternative to a traditional oral examination with question cards as they assess and evaluate subject knowledge; are held orally and thus, a foreign language is used throughout RTDs and might be evaluated as well; provide an invaluable opportunity to assess subject knowledge and foreign language speaking skills simultaneously.

Moreover, roundtable discussions have some advantages over traditional forms of assessment as they create a semi-authentic atmosphere of the natural flow of communication with a native speaker; test knowledge of all themes covered during the course, not just one or two; allow students to stop being nervous, but concentrate on the issue at hand and feel confident, because they are not in the spotlight all the time; and assist students with practising their RTD skills which are needed both for their BA studies, postgraduate studies and their future professional life.

Roundtable discussions have been used for educational purposes in an academic environment for years. The author herself has been using RTDs for more than five years and found them to be an efficient and effective means of education and assessment. The research showed that RTDs develop important language skills and promote independent learning. Not only do RTDs involve speaking skills, but also reading (to prepare for the discussion and find relevant supporting material), listening (to the other members of the discussion and to the questions asked) and writing (to complete the follow-up writing task). What is more, roundtable discussions enable teachers to evaluate students' subject knowledge of a course and their foreign language skills, and prepare students for their further academic and professional life.

The expedience of the use of RTDs should be taken into consideration both by tertiary educators and secondary school teachers as RTDs have proved to be an efficient tool for education while the evaluation criteria described in the article promote reliable scoring of the exam.

This study would enhance with further research and analysis on the use of RTDs as a form of summative and formative assessment in different educational contexts. It would be instrumental to encourage educators from various institutions throughout the world to use RTDs as an assessment tool in order to see if their use might be justified in every sphere and whether the perception of students towards this form of evaluation would differ depending on their cultural background and the subject taught.

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