

# Implementing Numbered Heads Together to Support Junior High School Students' Speaking Engagement

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\*Tsuhanda Liwia Pasaribu, Daud Jiwandono<sup>ab</sup> 

<sup>12</sup>Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: [tsuhandapasaribu@students.unnes.ac.id](mailto:tsuhandapasaribu@students.unnes.ac.id)

## A B S T R A C T

Speaking engagement is one of the essential components of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. However, many students in Indonesia still struggle to participate actively in speaking activities. Cooperative learning strategies such as Numbered Heads Together (NHT) can provide opportunities to enhance students' speaking engagement. This qualitative study aims to explore the role of NHT in supporting students' speaking engagement and to investigate students' and the teacher's perceptions of its use. The study involved 30 seventh-grade students at SMPN 12 Semarang as participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with students and the teacher. The findings indicate that NHT supported students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement during speaking activities. Both the students and the teacher perceived NHT positively, as it encouraged participation, collaboration, and idea development. This study concludes that NHT can be an effective strategy for supporting students' speaking engagement in English language classrooms.

**Keywords:** *Numbered Heads Together, Speaking Engagement, Cooperative Learning, Students' Perception*

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## INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills are widely recognized as a fundamental component of English as a foreign language (EFL), because it serves as an indicator of students' ability to communicate effectively (Richards, 2008). In the context of English as a foreign language, speaking skills are a key indicator of language learner success. In education, especially at the junior high school level, speaking skills are not only a means of communication but also an indicator of student language development, enabling students to convey ideas, express opinions, and participate meaningfully in interactions (Darmuki et al., 2018). Therefore, enhancing learners' ability to communicate orally remains an important goal of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction.

Although speaking skills are important for language learning, in an EFL context, encouraging student participation remains a major challenge. Many students in junior high school show low levels of enthusiasm and tend to be reluctant or hesitant when expressing their ideas during speaking activities. This condition is often attributed to the limited opportunities for collaborative interaction and students' persistent fear of speaking up in class (R. Gillies, 2016; Namaziandost et al., 2019). Although there is currently a global shift toward student-centered teaching, but the implementation of this approach is not yet been fully optimized. Teachers still face various challenges in effectively applying this students-centered approach in English as a foreign language (Balliya et al., 2025; Nazim et al., 2024). This indicates that although a student-centered approach has been recommended, its implementation in EFL classroom has no yet been fully optimized, therefore more effective teaching strategies are needed to encourage students' active engagement in speaking activities.

In response to these challenges, student engagement plays an important role in language learning, especially in speaking activities. Engagement refers to active participation, involvement, and effort during the learning process (Li & Xue, 2023). Fredricks et al. (2004) argue that in speaking instruction, engaged students are willing to participate in discussions, express ideas, and also interact with peers. Therefore, creating an effective and meaningful classroom atmosphere is essential to increasing student speaking engagement.

To support increasing students' engagement in speaking activities, one widely recognized teaching approach is cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Slavin, 1995). This instructional approach emphasizes collaboration among students, shared responsibility, and interdependence in achieving learning goals. Based on social interdependence theory, cooperative learning emphasizes a social process in which students actively construct knowledge and responsibility through interaction with others (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Through these interactions, students have opportunities to communicate with peers, exchange ideas, and participate more actively in classroom activities, which may enhance their engagement in speaking (R. Gillies, 2016).

Among various cooperative learning techniques, one technique that emphasizes equal participation and individual responsibility is Numbered Heads Together (NHT). In this technique, students are encouraged to work together in groups, discussing an idea or task together before being called on individually to give their responses (Kagan, 1994). This learning strategy encourages equal participation among students and reduces the fear of speaking by fostering responsibility within the group and a growing sense of needing one another (Rusmiati, 2016). Numbered Heads Together has a positive influence on student speaking engagement, students are motivated to participate actively in speaking activities, which will create a supportive and interactive learning environment.

Previous studies have examined the effectiveness of Numbered Heads Together in improving academic achievement, motivation, and speaking skills (Irmayanti, 2023; Kusuma & Rahayu, 2024; Namusoke & Rukundo, 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2024). However, only a few studies have focused on students' speaking engagement in particular, especially in the context of English language learning in junior high schools. Furthermore, exploration of teacher's and students' perceptions of the use of NHT in speaking activities is still limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore the application of Numbered Heads Together in supporting students' speaking engagement in junior high school English classes and to investigate students' and teacher's perceptions of its use.

This study is based on the following research questions: (1) How is Numbered Heads Together implemented to support students' speaking engagement in junior high school English classes? (2) How do the students and the teacher perceive the use of Numbered Heads Together for enhancing speaking engagement?

By exploring these dimensions, this study not only documents the implementation of a structured cooperative learning strategy but also provides an in-depth understanding of how structured interdependence influences students' engagement in English-speaking activities. The pedagogical insights derived from the classroom context are expected to offer practical strategies for junior high school teachers who encounter similar engagement challenges in EFL settings.

## METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' speaking engagement during the implementation of the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) strategy in the English classroom. Qualitative research explores participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours in their natural environments (Creswell, 2014). Case studies allow for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in real life using various data sources (Yin, 2014). This approach is appropriate for investigating pedagogical practices in the classroom and facilitating naturalistic observation of the instructional process. It allows for a comprehensive

analysis of teacher-student interactions during the implementation of the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) strategy.

To enhance the credibility, trustworthiness and validity of the findings, data triangulation was consistently employed throughout the study by combining multiple data sources. Although this study presents numerical data in the form of percentages derived from classroom observation checklists and student questionnaires; these figures are utilized strictly as descriptive statistics. They serve as complementary, supporting data to illustrate general trends and enhance the triangulation process rather than to test hypotheses or make statistical inferences (Miles et al., 2014). This descriptive statistical mapping provides a foundational pattern that is then interpreted and understood through in-depth qualitative analysis of the classroom observations and interview transcripts.

## Respondent

The participants in this research were 30 seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 12 Semarang and one English teacher. Seventh-grade students were selected because learners at this level commonly encounter challenges in English speaking, particularly in terms of confidence and participation in class. The English teacher was selected through purposive sampling because she was responsible for teaching the class in which the research was conducted. In this research, the researcher served as a practitioner-researcher, implementing the NHT strategy to ensure pedagogical fidelity. Meanwhile, the teacher served as an informant, providing professional perspectives on the implementation process and its impact on students' speaking engagement.

## Instruments

Data for this study were granted through three instruments: classroom observation, students' questionnaires, and semi-structured interview with both the teacher and selected students. Various data sources were used to increase the credibility of the findings through triangulation (Yin & Campbell, 2018). Classroom observations were conducted to explore the implementation of NHT and identify students' speaking engagement during the learning process. The observations focused on teaching procedures, speaking activities, and indicators of students' engagement such as participation, attention, and willingness to speak.

A questionnaire was administered to investigate students' perceptions of NHT implementation. Students' perceptions of NHT implementation were examined through a questionnaire comprising 15 closed-ended items rated on a four-point Likert scale. These items were designed to capture students' responses, feelings, and behavioural trends regarding their speaking engagement during the cooperative learning activities. A semi-structured interview was conducted to explore teacher's and students' perceptions of the implementation of NHT on student speaking engagement. This was done to gain deeper insight and remain aligned with the research objectives.

## Procedures

This study was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher planned the learning and prepared teaching materials based on the NHT strategy. Second, NHT was implemented during three class sessions to allow for a more comprehensive observation of pattern of student engagement in speaking. Throughout the learning process, classroom observation was conducted using structured checklist based on the student engagement framework proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), this framework conceptualizes engagement into three distinct dimensions: Behavioural engagement encompasses students' persistence, effort, and active participation in classroom activities, such as contributing to group discussions, following the teacher's instructions, and completing the tasks. Emotional engagement refers to students' affective responses toward the learning process, including their enthusiasm, interest enjoyment, and reduction of anxiety or nervousness during speaking activities. Cognitive engagement involves students' investment in learning, strategic thinking and psychological effort, characterized by their readiness to prepare responses, choice of vocabulary and

elaboration of idea. These dimensions served as the indicators for the observation items to systematically monitor students' oral participation during the NHT implementation.

Following the implementation of NHT, students were asked to complete Likert-scale questionnaires to gather their perspectives on their engagement during NHT implementation. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six selected students representing different levels of participation (active, moderately active, and less active), as determined by classroom observation. This served to examine their experiences and perceptions in greater detail. Furthermore, to enrich and triangulate the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the English teacher and selected students to obtain in-depth information and insights regarding the implementation of the NHT strategy and students' engagement.

### Data Analysis

The data were analysed following the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which consists of several main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

The analysis began with data condensation, which involved selecting, focusing, and transforming observational data, students' questionnaires, and students'-teachers' interview transcripts. This process required coding the qualitative data to identify themes and label data segments relevant to students' speaking engagement. During this phase, the numerical data derived from the classroom observation checklist and Likert-scale questionnaires were calculated using simple descriptive statistics to determine the percentages scores. These percentages served strictly as descriptive indicators to map out the general trends of students' engagement across meetings, which directly facilitated the subsequent qualitative data triangulation. Meanwhile the responses from the student questionnaires were tabulated and calculated to find descriptive percentage for each engagement dimension. Irrelevant information was discarded so that the analysis directly answered the research questions of this study.

The next step was data display, in which the analysed data were organized and presented systematically to facilitate the drawing of conclusions. In this study, the numerical data processed from the observation checklist and questionnaires were presented in tables and descriptive matrices to illustrate the development of students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement across the three meetings. The coded qualitative data obtained from the interview transcripts were presented in narrative form and thematic networks embedded within the corresponding dimensions of engagement. This integrated display enabled the researcher to compare data more easily, identify emerging patterns, and establish meaningful relationships across multiple data sources during the triangulation process. In the final stages, conclusions were drawn by interpreting recurring themes across the data. Verification was conducted through triangulation by comparing the findings from observations, questionnaires, and interviews to ensure the credibility of the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Implementing Numbered Heads Together to Support Students' Speaking Engagement

The research findings indicate that the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) method was implemented consistently across three class sessions, following a structured sequence of collaborative steps: assigning numbers to students, conducting group discussions, and calling out numbers or having students report on the result of their discussions. During the implementations, students worked collaboratively to discuss speaking tasks and responded individually when their number were called. This structure encouraged students to prepare their responses collaboratively and gain confidence before presenting them individually during oral activities. To analyse how the NHT method promotes students' oral participation, the observational data were categorized according to three dimensions proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) are behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement dimensions.

Table 1. Students' Behavioural, Emotional, and Cognitive Engagement during NHT Implementation

Aspect	Meeting 1 (%)	Meeting 2 (%)	Meeting 3 (%)
Behavioral	60%	86,7%	93,3%
Emotional	66,7%	80%	93,3%
Cognitive	60%	80%	80%

Overall, the observation findings show that all dimensions of student engagement improved gradually throughout the implementation of NHT. As table 1 shows, a gradual increase in student language participation was observed during the implementation of the NHT method. Students' behavioral engagement increased from 60% in the first meeting to 86,7% in the second meeting and 93,3% in the third meeting. These percentages emerged from the systematic calculation of the observation checklist tracking 30 students. In the first meeting, the 60% figure indicates that only 18 out of 30 students consistently demonstrated active behavioral participation. The lower percentage in the initial meeting may be attributed to students' adjustment to the structured procedures of NHT, which led to some confusion during the grouping phase. However, the percentages increased considerably in the second and third meetings. This improvement was particularly reflected in the categories of active participation, following instructions and responding when their numbers were called.

These findings indicate that students gradually became more actively engaged in group discussions with their peers, actively participated, contributed ideas, and responded with greater confidence. This pattern reflects how peer interaction fostered students' active participation in classroom speaking activities. According to Slavin (1995) individual accountability and collaborative discussion are essential elements in promoting active participation. The observation findings were supported by teacher's perception. The teacher stated, "Students' participation during NHT activities was generally better because the strategy made learning less monotonous." Similar findings were reported by Gillies (2006), who found that cooperative interaction encourages students to contribute more actively during classroom discussions.

Students' emotional engagement also showed significant improvement during the implementation of NHT. Students' emotional engagement increased from 66,7% in the first meeting to 80% in the second meeting and further increased to 93,3% in the final meeting. The 66,7% recorded in the first meeting indicates that exactly 20 out of 30 students demonstrated positive emotional responses during the NHT activities, while the remaining 10 students still showed signs of language anxiety, hesitation to speak and nervousness. These reactions were largely attributed to students' fear of speaking English in front of their classmates. The substantial increase in emotional engagement to 93,3% in the final meeting was particularly evident in the categories of interest in the learning activities and comfort in working within groups. The students appeared more comfortable and enthusiastic during speaking activities, as they worked collaboratively and remained focused on the assigned tasks or discussion topics. This discussion process provided students with opportunities to express their ideas in a less pressured environment, which gradually supported the development of their confidence in participating during speaking activities.

Despite these positive outcomes, classroom observation revealed that a notable portion of the class specifically around 26,7% or 8 out of 30 students still showed persistent signs of anxiety when asked to present the discussion result after their numbers were called. During oral presentation their appeared nervous while speaking as evidenced by hesitant pauses, low voice volume and a constant tendency to look back at their peers to confirm whether their answers were correct. This behavioural pattern directly explains why the observation checklist item for 'feeling comfortable when giving presentation' remained stagnant at a score of 2 (sometimes observed) across all three meetings. Feelings such as anxiety and nervousness can influence students' willingness to communicate in a foreign language (Krashen, 1985). This indicated that although cooperative learning can reduce speaking pressure, speaking situations may still trigger communication anxiety among students.

Compared to behavioural and emotional engagement, which showed significant improvement, cognitive engagement demonstrated only a moderate increase. As displayed in Table 1, the percentage for cognitive engagement started 60% in the first meeting, rose to 80% in the second meeting, and remained stable at the same percentage in the third. This percentages emerged directly from tracking the cognitive performance of the 30 students across five specific indicators. In the first meeting, the only 18 out of 30 students consistently demonstrated cognitive investment. During the first meeting, students experienced difficulties in elaborating their ideas, an indicator that was organized as not observed. Although students made effort to understand the discussion topic before responding, their language preparation was limited and reflected insufficient cognitive readiness to construct independent English sentences.

In the second meeting, a distinct improvement was observed as the number of cognitively engaged participants rose to 24 out of 30 students. The structured procedures of NHT successfully encouraged students to make greater efforts to understand the discussion topics and think before expressing their ideas. Group discussions provided students with opportunities to review information, exchange ideas and organize their thoughts collaboratively. Furthermore, the indicator of idea development showed a slight improvement, as students began to incorporate their group members' ideas into their own responses.

However, in the third meeting, cognitive engagement reached a plateau at 80% as several core cognitive skills failed to show further improvement, meaning that the same 24 students maintained their cognitive involvement while remaining 6 students still struggled. Although students maintained a high-level performance in understanding the discussion topics and thinking before speaking, three important indicators-using appropriate vocabulary, elaborating ideas, and connecting ideas to construct coherent responses remained stagnant. The observation findings suggest that individual differences in vocabulary mastery and students' reliance on their peers limited further cognitive growth. Students with lower proficiency tended to memorize or read prepared sentences verbatim without making efforts to expand or develop their own responses.

Nevertheless, students' cognitive engagement showed improvements in terms of preparation, comprehension and idea organization. This was reflected in how students spent more time preparing and organizing their answers before speaking, as they attempted to understand the discussion topics and discussion outcomes before representing the group in presenting the result. This finding was supported by teacher interview, which revealed that discussion activities provide students with time to think and practice speaking within their group before speaking in front of the class, enabling them to deliver more organized and structured responses. These findings, indicate that discussion opportunities in NHT supported and facilitated students' readiness and idea development before speaking. Consistent with Gillies (2006), who reported that cooperative discussions facilitate the development of ideas and cognitive engagement through peer interaction and support.

Overall, the implementation findings show that NHT promotes students' speaking engagement through interactive, collaborative, and structured activities that support the development of ideas and encourages students speaking readiness.

### **Positive Participation and Collaborative Speaking**

Beyond the observed implementation process, students and teacher also expressed various perceptions regarding NHT's contribution to speaking engagement. Most students perceived that NHT encouraged more active participation during speaking activities. This was demonstrated by their collaboration in group as they strive to convey their ideas to one another. The questionnaire data on the behavioral aspect showed a score of 83.1%, indicating that students felt more involved in the learning process by paying attention and remaining focused during discussions. They also attempted to respond when their numbers were called to answer questions or present the group discussion results. A similar result was reported by Kusuma et al. (2025) [Click or tap here to enter text.](#), which found that students perceived NHT

as an enjoyable and effective strategy that encouraged participation, improved confidence, and supported speaking development.

This finding was strongly supported by interviews with students. Student 1 stated, "I often share ideas with my friends." This response indicates that NHT encouraged students to contribute ideas actively during group discussions. Meanwhile, student 5 explained, "Sometimes I just listen to my friends' ideas and try to understand them." These suggest that participation was not limited to speaking but also involved actively listening to and understanding peers' perspectives. A similar perception was also expressed by the teacher, "The NHT method used made learning less monotonous and improved students' participation level. Students became more focused when called upon or given opportunities to practice speaking based on their assigned numbers." These findings support the view that cooperative learning models encourage students to engage actively in discussions and collaborate with their peers during speaking activities. Overall, opportunities for collaborative speaking encouraged students to participate more actively in the learning process.

### **Emotional Responses Toward Speaking Activities**

Students expressed a range of emotional responses during NHT implementation. Students felt comfortable and enjoyed the learning activities throughout the learning process; several students also reported feeling greater confidence when speaking during NHT-based lessons. The questionnaire result showed that emotional engagement reached 78.6%, a percentage that significantly influenced students' emotional state. The highest score was found in the aspect of students feeling comfortable collaborating in groups. Student 2 reported that working in groups was enjoyable, "I felt happy because I liked group work". This indicates students' engagement during the learning process using NHT. A feeling of comfort and interest encouraged students to become more focused and motivated to participate in speaking activities. Some students also demonstrate a higher-level confidence in speaking because they had opportunities to practice in group. This collaborative interaction can reduce the pressure of speaking as students receive support and the opportunity to prepare themselves before speaking in public. A supportive environment helps students participate more actively.

Despite this positive response, the questionnaires data explicitly clarified the exact numbers of students who still struggled with emotional barriers. Specifically, 26,7% or 8 out of 30 students reported experiencing anxiety. This emotional challenge was clearly evidenced by the questionnaire item, "I feel less nervous when speaking in front of the class", where 20% or 6 students expressed disagreement and 6,7% or 2 students strongly disagreed with the statement.

Furthermore, this anxiety was closely linked to their lack of self-confidence on the questionnaire item "I feel confident when speaking English using Numbered Heads Together" 16,7% or 5 students expressed disagreement. These 8 anxious students admitted to feeling nervousness when their number were called during the individual accountability phase. As student 4 explicitly stated 'I feel nervous when my number is called'. This finding is consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986), who found that the fear of making mistakes and speaking in public often contributes to anxiety in foreign language learning among students. The teacher also acknowledged that "Anxiety among students is inevitable, and not all students possess the same level of ability and confidence." Therefore, it is normal for some students to exhibit anxiety. A cooperative learning environment can reduce speaking anxiety by providing a supportive atmosphere and opportunities to receive help from peers, although some students may still experience nervousness when speaking in public (Meilasari et al., 2023). These findings indicate that students' emotional engagement improved, although the development of self-confidence remains gradual and requires time.

## **Cognitive Preparation and Idea Development**

The students perceived that NHT supported their preparation and the development of their ideas before speaking; this was evident in the fact that NHT gave students time to think and discuss before their numbers were called. In addition, students reported making greater efforts to understand the discussion topics and outcomes. Student 4 stated, "discussion helped because we wrote our answers first and then read them several times before speaking". Student 5 also explained, "Sometimes I just listen to my friends' ideas and try to understand them." This suggests that students were given opportunities to revisit and process the information discussed before responding. By striving to understand the discussion content and outcomes, students develop a deeper, and more organized understanding of the topics being discussed. The questionnaire results further strengthened this perception, showing a relatively high score of 84.8%, which was higher than the behavioral and emotional aspects. The highest-rated questionnaire item was related to group discussion, indicating that students perceived collaborative discussion as particularly helpful for preparing their responses. As a result, students were able to present more developed responses by exchanging ideas and practicing within their groups before presenting publicly. Cooperative learning activities facilitate idea development, language preparation, and speaking fluency through peer interaction before students present their responses (Namaziandost et al., 2020).

The teacher also stated, "students appeared more prepared to present the result of their discussions because they collaborated within their groups. Furthermore, encouragement and positive support from peers also influenced the students during the learning process." The collaborative discussion process enabled students to exchange ideas, refine their thoughts, and organize their responses before presenting them. Collaborative discussion supports students' idea development and speaking preparation through peer interaction (R. M. Gillies, 2006). These findings indicate that NHT not only supports deeper preparation and performance in students' speaking but also facilitates students' cognitive preparation during speaking activities.

## **Remaining Challenges and Practical Implications**

Although NHT demonstrated positive contributions, some students continued to experience anxiety during speaking activities, which occasionally limited their participation in group discussions. In addition, some students continued to rely heavily on their group members and showed limited contributions during speaking activities. Students' vocabulary uses during speaking activities and in presenting discussion results was also still limited; students tended to use the same vocabulary repeatedly, resulting in a lack of lexical variety. These findings suggest the need for additional guidance, vocabulary support, and encouragement to help students participate with greater confidence during speaking activities. Teachers may therefore combine NHT with structured vocabulary-building and speaking support to help less confident students participate more independently.

Overall, the findings indicate that NHT was perceived positively by both students and teachers as an effective strategy in English language learning instruction that promoted greater participation, collaboration, and preparation during speaking activities. Through structured group discussion and individual accountability, students were given opportunities to contribute ideas, develop confidence and prepare responses before speaking. Nevertheless, differences in self-confidence, speaking skills, and vocabulary mastery continued to influence their level of participation in English speaking activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that implementing Numbered Heads Together (NHT) supported students' speaking engagement through collaborative discussion and individual accountability. Research findings indicated improvement in behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, while both teachers and students perceived NHT as a positive strategy for encouraging participation, self-confidence, and idea preparation during speaking activities. For broader application, this technique can serve as an alternative learning strategy to encourage active participation in English-speaking classes. However, this study is limited to a single classroom context and a relatively short implementation period. Further studies may examine the implementation of NHT in different educational settings and over extended periods to provide further insight into its influence on students' speaking engagement.

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