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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF NUMBERED HEADS TOGETHER ON THEIR SPEAKING ANXIETY

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**Abstract:** Speaking anxiety often becomes a major challenge for EFL students, leading to low willingness or confidence when speaking in English. Cooperative learning techniques have been suggested to address this issue. This study aimed to investigate EFL students' perceptions of Numbered Heads Together on their speaking anxiety. This study used a descriptive qualitative method with 58 senior high school students in Semarang as respondents. The data were gathered through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to identify the response pattern, while the interview data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that students generally perceived NHT positively in reducing their speaking anxiety. The integration of the questionnaire and the interview findings showed that NHT created a supportive learning environment, reduced the fear of negative evaluation, and fostered self-confidence in speaking activities.

**Keywords:** Numbered Heads Together, EFL Students, Speaking Anxiety, Cooperative Learning.

## PERSEPSI SISWA EFL TERHADAP METODE NUMBERED HEADS TOGETHER TERHADAP KECEMASAN BERBICARA MEREKA

**Abstrak:** Kecemasan berbicara sering kali menjadi tantangan utama bagi siswa EFL, yang mengakibatkan rendahnya kemauan atau kepercayaan diri saat berbicara dalam bahasa Inggris. Teknik pembelajaran kooperatif telah diusulkan untuk mengatasi masalah ini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki persepsi siswa EFL terhadap Numbered Heads Together (NHT) terhadap kecemasan berbicara mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan 58 siswa SMA di Semarang sebagai responden. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur yang menggunakan skala Likert lima poin dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Data kuesioner dianalisis secara deskriptif untuk mengidentifikasi pola jawaban, sedangkan data wawancara dianalisis secara tematis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa siswa secara umum memandang NHT secara positif dalam mengurangi kecemasan berbicara mereka. Integrasi temuan kuesioner dan wawancara menunjukkan bahwa NHT menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang mendukung, mengurangi rasa takut akan evaluasi negatif, dan menumbuhkan kepercayaan diri dalam kegiatan berbicara.

**Kata kunci:** Numbered Heads Together, Siswa EFL, Kecemasan Berbicara, Pembelajaran Kooperatif.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this modern era, English has become a common subject taught in every part of the world. In English, speaking is considered a crucial skill, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, as it enables learners to communicate their ideas, express opinions, and participate in social interactions effectively (Akhter, 2021). Despite its importance, speaking is often perceived as the most challenging skill to master for EFL students, as it requires language competence and confidence when speaking (Casanova & Kalisa, 2026). In the EFL context, many students struggle with speaking activities due to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence (Alazeer and Ahmed, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Yasmin et al., 2025; Fauziah & Kalisa, 2025). These difficulties create anxiety in speaking for EFL students, which leads to a lack of EFL students being active in speaking English in a class. When it happens in a foreign language class, it is often defined as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). FLA is a complex set of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to language learning in the classroom, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process (Horwitz, 1998). Furthermore, Horwitz (1998) stated that the biggest obstacle for learners to learn a foreign language is having anxiety about speaking in the target language. Therefore, it is essential to explore effective teaching strategies that can reduce students' speaking anxiety while simultaneously improving their speaking performance.

One of the methods that can address this problem is by implementing the Cooperative Learning (CL) techniques. Cooperative learning is a very suitable option as it promotes students' interaction, collaboration, and participation in the class (Slavin, 1980; Loor et al., 2024; Ilmi, 2023; Jawad, 2023; Morán & Iza, 2024; Namaziandost et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021; Thé & Ngoc, 2024). Cooperative learning has many techniques that can be implemented, and one of the techniques is Numbered Heads Together. Numbered Heads Together (NHT) is an activity where the students work in groups, each assigned a number as their identity, then put their heads together to find the best answer to the question or problem (Kagan, 1989). As NHT stresses the point of students putting their heads together to solve the problem, this technique has great potential to address the issue.

Previous studies have found that implementing NHT improves students' speaking skills and overall learning outcomes (Kusuma & Rahayu, 2024; Patau, 2022; Darmajaya & Saputra, 2024; Mahmud & Arifiyana, 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2025). However, these studies have focused solely on improvements in speaking ability and learning outcomes, but have not sufficiently explored students' perceptions regarding the implementation of NHT, particularly in terms of their anxiety when speaking. Consequently, there remains a gap in the research examining students' perceptions of NHT implementation. This gap is important to address and investigate, given that students' sense of comfort and safety while learning is a critical factor in the learning process.

Addressing this gap, this study aims to investigate students' perceptions of the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) technique, particularly concerning their speaking anxiety. Referring to the principles of cooperative learning, NHT is assumed to provide equal opportunities for students to participate in discussions, strengthen peer support, and create a more positive and less intimidating classroom environment. Therefore, this study seeks to determine how students perceive the use of NHT in reducing their anxiety and encouraging them to speak more confidently in English.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to identify students' perceptions of NHT in relation to their speaking anxiety. The reason for using this method was that descriptive qualitative research is an important and appropriate design for research questions that focus on a deep understanding of a little-understood field of research (Ayton, 2023). The researcher focused on a

detailed and meaningful descriptive analysis of students' responses to learning strategies and their impact on their anxiety when speaking English.

The participants in this study were 58 students from a State Senior High School in Semarang. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby the researcher deliberately selected participants based on the characteristics required for this study. The students' ages ranged from 16 to 17 years old, with an average of 8 years of English learning experience since elementary school, and most were unfamiliar with the term “cooperative learning techniques.”

This research used questionnaires and interviews as the instruments and data collection methods. A structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions was distributed after the students had been taught using NHT for 2 weeks or 6 sessions. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree”. The questionnaire focused on students' feelings, group interaction, emotional changes, and readiness to speak during the NHT activity. Interviews were used to gain deeper information about the students' perceptions. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 8 interviewees as the source of information. The interviews aimed to clarify students' answers on the questionnaire and explore their personal reflections on whether NHT helped them reduce their anxiety about speaking.

The data collected were analyzed in two ways; a) the data gathered from the questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the trends in the students' responses (the results from the questionnaires provided an overview of the data) and b) the data gathered from interviews was analyzed by using thematic analysis. The main themes included 1) NHT created a supportive environment, 2) NHT reduced the fear of negative evaluation, and 3) NHT boosted self-confidence in conversational activities. After all the data were analyzed, the researchers combined the two sets of data to complement each other, allowing the final results of this study to be determined.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. RESULTS

The analysis of the questionnaire data obtained focused on identifying patterns revealed by the average Likert scale scores for each section of the questionnaire that has been determined, so that the results can be interpreted descriptively and in depth rather than solely through numerical calculations. Interview data were analyzed thematically as previously determined. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of student perceptions, the questionnaire results were directly integrated with the interview findings, so that the numerical patterns shown in the questionnaire section could be explained and reinforced with the personal experiences of students from the interview results. The presentation of the interview results was also reinforced with excerpts from the responses of the students who were interviewed.

#### 1. *Feelings during Numbered Heads Together activities*

**Table 1**

Feelings during Numbered Heads Together activities

| No | Statement   | SD           | D            | N              | A              | SA             |
|----|---|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1  | I feel calmer speaking English when using NHT.                | 2<br>(3.45%) | 4<br>(6.90%) | 30<br>(51.72%) | 17<br>(29.31%) | 5 (8.62%)      |
| 2  | I feel less nervous because I can discuss before speaking.    | 1<br>(1.72%) | 3<br>(5.17%) | 16<br>(27.59%) | 24<br>(41.38%) | 14<br>(24.14%) |
| 3  | I feel more confident after receiving group support.          | 2<br>(3.45%) | 0<br>(0.00%) | 12<br>(20.69%) | 32<br>(55.17%) | 12<br>(20.69%) |
| 4  | I am braver to speak because everyone has a chance to answer. | 2<br>(3.45%) | 2<br>(3.45%) | 19<br>(32.76%) | 21<br>(36.21%) | 14<br>(24.14%) |

|   |   |              |              |                |                |                |
|---|---|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 5 | I feel more comfortable because I do not speak alone. | 2<br>(3.45%) | 3<br>(5.17%) | 19<br>(32.76%) | 22<br>(37.93%) | 12<br>(20.69%) |
| 6 | NHT is an enjoyable method for learning speaking.     | 2<br>(3.45%) | 2<br>(3.45%) | 20<br>(34.48%) | 17<br>(29.31%) | 17<br>(29.31%) |

Based on the table above, which refers to students' perceptions of how they feel when participating in NHT activities, although the number of students who chose the Neutral option appears to be quite high, the overall results of the students' choices point to a positive direction. The average number of students who chose the Neutral option was 33% (19 students) of the total respondents for each statement. This indicates that some students still do not show positive feelings regarding the implementation of NHT in classroom learning. Although the value of the Neutral option is quite prominent, this cannot overshadow the results of students who chose the Agree and Strongly Agree options, which showed higher numbers. With an average of 59% (35 students) choosing the Agree and Strongly Agree options for each statement, this indicates that most students taught using the NHT technique have positive feelings when participating in NHT activities. On the other hand, the number of students who chose Disagree and Strongly Disagree was only around 4.1% (2 students) for each statement.

The results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire responses in this section indicate that students have a good feeling during participate in the NHT activities. Therefore, it is strongly supported by students' interview responses, which showed that the use of NHT techniques results in a reduction of students' fear of negative evaluations. The finding from the interviews with students was that the use of NHT in learning results in a reduction of their fear of receiving negative evaluations. Many students admitted that before participating in learning activities with NHT, they felt afraid when asked to speak English in class because they were afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation or word choice and receiving negative responses or evaluations. After participating in NHT activities several times, students stated that they began to feel comfortable and calm when speaking English. This factor was also based on the opportunity to discuss with their group first before speaking in front of the class, which made them feel more prepared and helped them reduce their fear of receiving negative evaluations. Several students also stated that when they made a mistake, it felt less threatening because they had supportive group members. This can be concluded based on excerpts from interviews with students, including:

*"I feel more comfortable practicing with other friends in the group so that I am not afraid of feeling alone when I make mistakes."* (Student 6)

*"I feel more relieved because here I am not judged when I make mistakes."* (Student 3)

## 2. Peer support and interaction within the group

**Table 2**

Peer support and interaction within the group

| No | Statement  | SD           | D            | N              | A              | SA             |
|----|--|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 7  | Group discussion helps reduce my anxiety.                    | 3<br>(5.17%) | 2<br>(3.45%) | 11<br>(18.97%) | 34<br>(58.62%) | 8 (13.79%)     |
| 8  | I am not afraid of making mistakes because my peers help me. | 2<br>(3.45%) | 3<br>(5.17%) | 12<br>(20.69%) | 31<br>(53.45%) | 10<br>(17.24%) |
| 9  | I feel relaxed because group members listen to my ideas.     | 2<br>(3.45%) | 1<br>(1.72%) | 19<br>(32.76%) | 24<br>(41.38%) | 12<br>(20.69%) |
| 10 | Sharing responsibility increases my confidence.              | 2<br>(3.45%) | 3<br>(5.17%) | 15<br>(25.86%) | 29<br>(50.00%) | 9 (15.52%)     |
| 11 | Group support helps me express ideas easily.                 | 2<br>(3.45%) | 2<br>(3.45%) | 18<br>(31.03%) | 26<br>(44.83%) | 10<br>(17.24%) |

In the section on student perceptions focusing on support and interaction within the groups, the table above shows significant positive values. Although some students still chose Neutral, this value was relatively small, with an average of 25.9% (15 students) answering Neutral for each statement. This still indicates that there are students who have not shown a positive perception in terms of support and group interaction in the NHT learning method. However, positive responses from students were dominant. An average of 67% (39 students) responded with Agree and Strongly Agree to each statement. Based on this data, it can be concluded that most students experienced a decrease in anxiety when speaking and fear of making mistakes when speaking, and felt calmer when they had to express their ideas in English because they received support from their groupmates and shared responsibility within the small NHT learning group. The number of students who chose the “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” options remained consistently low, with an average of 7.6% (4 students) for each statement. This suggests that there is minimal resistance from students to collaborative English-speaking activities.

The results of the questionnaire analysis above show that the use of NHT fosters peer support by creating a supportive learning environment. This is in line with the theme of the interview analysis. The interview findings show that implementing the NHT learning technique fosters a supportive and engaging learning environment. Students frequently mention group discussions as a key factor because they make students feel more supported. This is because, during group discussions, students can share opinions, assist each other, and prepare answers together without the fear of making mistakes, as all group members have equal responsibilities and opportunities. Students also highlight that learning in a group makes them feel less alone, which encourages them to be more confident and enthusiastic in speaking English. Developing this supportive learning environment can boost students' enthusiasm and motivation to participate in English-speaking activities in class. This can be concluded based on excerpts from interviews with students, including:

*“I feel more comfortable, especially since I have supportive friends who are ready to help if I make a mistake.”* (Student 7).

*“The classroom atmosphere became livelier, more enjoyable, and more supportive because of the discussions to help each other determine the answers.”* (Students 6).

*“Because the responsibility was shared among each student in the group and the students had the same opportunities to speak, I became more confident in speaking up and didn't feel alone.”* (Students 8).

### 3. Emotional change and speaking readiness

**Table 3**

Emotional change and speaking readiness

| No | Statement   | SD        | D          | N              | A              | SA         |
|----|---|-----------|------------|----------------|----------------|------------|
| 12 | I feel more prepared after group practice.          | 3 (5.17%) | 2 (3.45%)  | 21<br>(36.21%) | 25<br>(43.10%) | 7 (12.07%) |
| 13 | I am braver to speak in front of the class.         | 3 (5.17%) | 2 (3.45%)  | 30<br>(51.72%) | 19<br>(32.76%) | 4 (6.90%)  |
| 14 | I am less afraid of pronunciation mistakes.         | 2 (3.45%) | 5 (8.62%)  | 27<br>(46.55%) | 21<br>(36.21%) | 3 (5.17%)  |
| 15 | NHT makes me more active than conventional methods. | 2 (3.45%) | 3 (5.17%)  | 26<br>(44.83%) | 19<br>(32.76%) | 8 (13.79%) |
| 16 | NHT reduces fear of negative evaluation.            | 2 (3.45%) | 6 (10.34%) | 26<br>(44.83%) | 18<br>(31.03%) | 6 (10.34%) |
| 17 | NHT helps lower my speaking anxiety.                | 2 (3.45%) | 2 (3.45%)  | 24<br>(41.38%) | 25<br>(43.10%) | 5 (8.62%)  |
| 18 | I feel calmer after frequent NHT activities.        | 2 (3.45%) | 2 (3.45%)  | 26<br>(44.83%) | 25<br>(43.10%) | 3 (5.17%)  |
| 19 | I am less nervous when called by the teacher.       | 2 (3.45%) | 6 (10.34%) | 31<br>(53.45%) | 15<br>(25.86%) | 4 (6.90%)  |
| 20 | I can control anxiety when speaking in class.       | 2 (3.45%) | 9 (15.52%) | 26<br>(44.83%) | 19<br>(32.76%) | 2 (3.45%)  |

## EFL Students' Perceptions of Numbered Heads Together on Their Speaking Anxiety

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|    |  |           |           |             |             |           |
|----|--|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| 21 | I feel confident speaking in various situations. | 2 (3.45%) | 5 (8.62%) | 29 (50.00%) | 22 (37.93%) | 0 (0.00%) |
| 22 | My speaking anxiety decreases after NHT.         | 2 (3.45%) | 4 (6.90%) | 27 (46.55%) | 23 (39.66%) | 2 (3.45%) |
| 23 | NHT reduces my fear of speaking in class.        | 1 (1.72%) | 4 (6.90%) | 28 (48.28%) | 20 (34.48%) | 5 (8.62%) |
| 24 | I feel more confident after using NHT.           | 1 (1.72%) | 3 (5.17%) | 28 (48.28%) | 21 (36.21%) | 5 (8.62%) |
| 25 | Overall, NHT reduces my speaking anxiety.        | 1 (1.72%) | 3 (5.17%) | 26 (44.83%) | 24 (41.38%) | 4 (6.90%) |

Results related to emotional changes and speaking performance show a pattern of transition in students' responses to the implementation of the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) method. The results of student responses show a relatively high Neutral value, with an average of 46% (26 students) choosing the neutral response to the fourteen statements. Therefore, this indicates that many students still do not experience significant changes in their emotional state or readiness to speak after learning with the NHT method. Although neutral responses dominated, positive perceptions were clearly evident and consistently exceeded negative perceptions. With an average of 43% (25 students) giving Agree and Strongly Agree responses to the fourteen statements. Although the number of responses is not yet significant, it shows that there has been an improvement in students' emotional changes, namely a reduction in anxiety when speaking English and their readiness to speak English in various situations. Meanwhile, the negative responses given by students remained consistently low at around 10.2% (5 students) who chose Disagree or Strongly Disagree, indicating a low level of rejection of the method used.

These findings indicated that there was a positive, gradual transition in emotional changes and readiness to speak, even though the neutral values given by students are more dominant. This is consistent with and supported by the theme of the analysis of student interviews, which the results of the interviews also show that NHT contributes to building students' confidence in conversation activities. Students explained that they became more confident, courageous, and comfortable speaking English after participating in NHT's learning activities several times. Aspects such as receiving support from the group, shared responsibility, and equal opportunities to speak gradually began to build students' confidence in speaking English. With increased confidence, students became more active in class speaking activities.

*"At first I was afraid, but after following this method several times, I became more confident and brave enough to speak English."* (Student 6).

*"I became more confident than before. The main factor was when discussing with the group, where I was encouraged not to be afraid of making mistakes, which made me more confident."* (Student 5).

*"Previously, I felt less confident because I lacked practice, but after practicing a lot using NHT, I have started to feel a little more confident speaking English."* (Student 2).

In addition to the three main themes identified, the interview findings also showed students' overall acceptance of the NHT technique in speaking activities. Although several respondents felt surprised and afraid when they first participated in learning activities with NHT, most of the respondents believed that NHT was suitable for use in speaking activities. Students also said that it was necessary to continue using NHT in the future because, according to them, NHT made learning less monotonous, more interactive, and more supportive.

*"My first impression was that I was a little surprised because the classroom was noisy, but the learning process felt more exciting."* (Student 3).

*"In my opinion, this method is suitable and effective for learning speaking, because it creates a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere."* (Student 6).



*“In my opinion, this activity should be done again in future classes. Learning with this method makes learning more enjoyable, which makes me more enthusiastic about learning.”* (Student 5).

## **B. DISCUSSIONS**

This study aimed to identify EFL students' perceptions of Numbered Heads Together regarding their speaking anxiety. The questionnaires showed a clear pattern across all aspects measured. Although the presence of Neutral responses in the questionnaire, especially on the aspect of students' emotional change and speaking readiness was noticeable with the average of 46% (26 students), the positive perception still outweighed the negative responses with 43% (25 students). This pattern indicated that many students were in the transitional phase, which means they were still adapting to the NHT learning environment. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety develops from a complex learner's self-perceptions and classroom experiences. Therefore, an instant emotional change or positive impact was unlikely to happen. Otherwise, the students might have needed a longer exposure to the use of NHT in their learning process to attain better results.

Nevertheless, the dominance of Agree and Strongly Agree responses in the section on students' feelings when participating in NHT and peer support and interactions within the group showed that the application of the NHT learning method created a less threatening and supportive learning atmosphere. These findings were in line with the cooperative learning principles stated by Slavin (1980) and Kagan (1989), which emphasized positive interdependence, shared responsibility, and equal participation.

The interview findings strengthened the questionnaire by providing a deeper insight into students' experiences on NHT. The students reported that NHT reduced their fear of negative evaluation, which is a core component of foreign language anxiety identified by Horwitz et al. (1986). Through discussions in groups, students could help each other express their ideas and receive feedback from fellow group members before presenting their ideas to the whole class. This process made students feel more prepared and less afraid of making mistakes when speaking to the whole class. These findings supported previous research findings that emphasized that collaborative interaction is effective in reducing anxiety when speaking (Yasmin et al., 2025; Zhang, 2024).

Moreover, the students consistently reported that NHT was a learning method that promoted a supportive learning environment in which peer support and shared responsibility played a crucial role. This positive learning environment helped the students to feel less isolated, which resulted in them being more confident when speaking English. These findings were consistent with the previous research, which indicated that the cooperative learning method encouraged collaboration and peer support among the students (Namaziandost et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021; Loor et al., 2024).

Furthermore, both findings on the questionnaire and the interview indicated gradual improvement in students' self-confidence and speaking performance. Although not all students reported immediate improvement, many of them acknowledged increased courage, readiness, and activeness to speak in class. These findings were in line with previous research, which stated that cooperative learning, including NHT, had a positive influence on students' speaking performance and participation through sustained implementation (Mahmud & Arifiyana, 2022; Kusuma & Rahayu, 2024; Darmajaya & Saputra, 2024).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study investigated the EFL students' perceptions of Numbered Heads Together (NHT) on their speaking anxiety. The integration of the questionnaire and the interview findings shows that the student generally perceives NHT as an effective learning method that reduces their speaking anxiety

by creating a positive learning environment, reducing the fear of negative evaluation, and fostering self-confidence.

Although students' neutral perceptions of emotional change and speaking readiness are common among most students, the positive trends and low negative perception suggest that the benefits of NHT are developed gradually rather than instantly. This implies that the students need sustained exposure to the use of NHT to develop emotional change and readiness to speak.

Overall, this study suggests that the NHT learning method can be a long-term strategy to address speaking anxiety in an EFL classroom. By promoting aspects such as peer support, shared responsibility, equal opportunities, and collaborative interaction among the students, NHT can create a supportive speaking environment that causes less anxiety. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term effects of NHT on speaking performance and anxiety reduction across diverse learning contexts and proficiency levels.

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