



The Influence of the Numbered Heads Together Technique on the Learning Activeness of Grade IX Students in Christian Religious Education and Character Formation at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon

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ABSTRACT

Active participation is a key determinant of meaningful learning, yet Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia often remains teacher-centred, leaving students passive and reliant on memorization. This undermines the holistic goal of CRE, which seeks to integrate cognitive, moral, and spiritual formation. The Numbered Heads Together (NHT) cooperative learning model was introduced as an alternative strategy to enhance classroom activeness by promoting accountability, peer collaboration, and responsibility. This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design with a nonequivalent control group pretest–posttest structure. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon during the 2025/2026 academic year. The sample consisted of two intact Grade IX classes: IX-4 as the experimental group ($n = 26$) and IX-3 as the control group ($n = 28$), selected through purposive sampling (total $N = 54$). Data were collected using a validated 32-item activeness questionnaire, complemented by classroom observations and documentation. Statistical analysis included normalized gain (N-Gain) calculations, assumption checks, and an independent-samples t -test at a 0.05 significance level. The experimental group achieved a mean N-Gain of 0.7403 (high improvement), compared to 0.1610 (low improvement) in the control group. Inferential testing confirmed significant differences, $t(52) = 12.859$, $p < .001$. Observations revealed that students in the NHT group demonstrated greater participation, reflective questioning, and collaborative problem solving. Findings confirm that NHT significantly enhances learning activeness in CRE by fostering accountability, peer engagement, and responsibility. Despite requiring teacher preparation and time, NHT aligns with the character-building goals of Indonesian education and provides a practical strategy for revitalizing CRE classrooms.

Keywords: *Numbered Heads Together, Character Formation, Christian Religious Education*

INTRODUCTION

Active participation has long been acknowledged as one of the central determinants of effective and meaningful learning. When students are actively involved, they do not merely absorb information passively but instead engage in questioning, analyzing, and applying knowledge to practical contexts. Within the Indonesian educational framework, particularly in the 2013 Curriculum and its revisions, learning is directed not only toward the attainment of academic competencies but also toward the cultivation of character and social responsibility. Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Character Formation play a pivotal role in this mission because they aim to integrate faith, knowledge, and values into students' lives, thereby shaping individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also morally grounded and spiritually mature (Nainggolan, 2019). In practice, however, the implementation of CRE often faces obstacles. Many classrooms continue to employ teacher-centred approaches, where students are positioned as passive recipients of information. Teachers deliver biblical knowledge primarily through lectures, while students listen, take notes, and memorize content for examinations. Such practices reduce opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflection, which are essential for internalizing Christian values. The phenomenon of student passivity has been observed in various schools, including SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon, the setting of this study. Teachers frequently report that students exhibit limited engagement in discussions, rarely ask questions, and tend to focus on rote memorization rather than reflective application of biblical teachings. This reality indicates a mismatch between the intended goals of CRE - namely, character formation and active participation - and the methods used in instruction (Simanjuntak, 2020). Addressing this pedagogical gap requires innovative approaches that are student-centred, collaborative, and capable of fostering responsibility. One such method is the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) cooperative learning technique.

NHT, introduced by Kagan (1992), is a structured form of cooperative learning designed to ensure that every student within a group contributes to the learning process. In this model, students are placed into small heterogeneous groups, and each member is assigned a number. When a question is posed, the group collaborates to formulate an answer, after which the teacher randomly calls a specific number. The student assigned that number must present the group's collective response. This structure promotes accountability, as all group members must be prepared to answer, and it encourages participation, dialogue, and peer-to-peer teaching (Joyce & Weil, 2018). In addition, the model reduces the dominance of certain individuals in group work, as each student carries equal responsibility for representing their group. Research has shown that cooperative learning methods, including NHT, have significant effects on improving student engagement, comprehension, and motivation. For example, Hutapea (2022) reported that NHT enhanced student participation and motivation in mathematics learning, while similar findings have been documented in science and language instruction (Lumbantobing, 2021; Maharani & Tyas, 2017). Within the context of religious education, such techniques can be even more impactful, as they not only promote cognitive understanding but also provide a platform for students to practice values such as honesty,

responsibility, and mutual respect during group collaboration (Boiliu, 2020). These findings suggest that NHT has the potential to address the challenges of passivity in CRE classrooms, making lessons more interactive, meaningful, and transformative. The urgency of adopting methods like NHT in CRE becomes even clearer when considering the broader aims of Indonesian education. According to the national curriculum, learning should equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with the ability to live ethically and responsibly in society (Hidayat, 2019). CRE has a distinctive contribution to this mission by grounding values in biblical principles and fostering faith-based character development. However, if students remain disengaged and view CRE as abstract or irrelevant, these objectives will not be achieved. NHT offers a pathway to bridge this gap, as it enables students to link biblical knowledge with practical life applications through collaborative discussion and problem-solving (Situmorang, 2021). The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of the NHT technique on the learning activeness of Grade IX students at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon in the subject of Christian Religious Education and Character Formation. The study seeks to answer a central question: Does the Numbered Heads Together technique positively and significantly affect students' activeness in learning CRE compared to conventional teaching methods? The hypothesis proposed is that students taught using NHT would demonstrate significantly greater increases in activeness than those taught using traditional lecture-based approaches. By testing this hypothesis, the research aims to contribute empirical evidence and practical insights for improving pedagogical practices in CRE classrooms. It underscores the importance of aligning instructional strategies with the holistic goals of Indonesian education - preparing students to be both academically competent and Christ-centred in character.

METHODS

This study adopted a quantitative quasi-experimental design employing a nonequivalent control group with a pretest–posttest structure. The choice of this design was grounded in the practical realities of classroom research, where random assignment of students was not feasible due to existing class structures and administrative constraints. By using intact classes as the units of study, the design made it possible to investigate the causal effect of the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) technique under authentic classroom conditions, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the findings. The use of a control group further allowed for meaningful comparisons, as it provided a benchmark against which the outcomes of the experimental intervention could be evaluated. The incorporation of both pretest and posttest measurements also strengthened the design, enabling the researcher to assess not only between-group differences but also within-group change over time. The research was carried out at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon during July of the 2025/2026 academic year. The school was chosen because of its representativeness of rural secondary education in North Sumatra and the relevance of Christian Religious Education (CRE) and Character Formation as compulsory subjects within its curriculum. The population consisted of all Grade IX students enrolled in the school, totaling 110 individuals across several parallel classes. From this population, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select two intact classes that were comparable in terms of demographic characteristics and prior academic performance. Class IX-4, consisting of 26

students, was designated as the experimental group, while Class IX-3, consisting of 28 students, was assigned as the control group, resulting in a total sample size of 54 students. The experimental class was deliberately chosen on the basis of teacher observations that indicated relatively low baseline activeness in classroom participation, which was expected to provide an appropriate context for evaluating the potential of NHT to stimulate engagement.

The main instrument for data collection was a 32-item questionnaire designed to measure learning activeness. The questionnaire items were constructed based on established dimensions of activeness, including participation in classroom tasks, involvement in group problem solving, asking and answering questions, seeking information, contributing to discussions, and applying learning to relevant contexts. Prior to full implementation, the instrument underwent a process of validation and reliability testing as documented in the original thesis. Trialing ensured that the items were understandable and appropriately targeted to Grade IX students, while statistical analysis confirmed the internal consistency of the scale. To complement the questionnaire, additional data sources were incorporated in the form of classroom observations and documentation, such as lesson plans and teacher field notes, which provided a richer contextual picture and supported the triangulation of findings. The research procedure began with the administration of the pretest to both the experimental and control groups using the questionnaire. Following this, the experimental group was taught using the NHT technique across a series of CRE lessons. In these lessons, students were organized into small heterogeneous groups, each member received a number, and the group collaboratively discussed and prepared answers to teacher-posed questions. At random, the teacher called on a number, requiring the corresponding student to present the group's collective response. This process not only held all members accountable but also stimulated dialogue and collaboration. In contrast, the control group received instruction through conventional methods, which were predominantly lecture-based with teacher questioning directed to individuals without structured group collaboration. After the treatment period concluded, all students completed the posttest. Classroom observations were conducted throughout the intervention to document patterns of student engagement, and relevant documents were collected to ensure consistency between lesson planning and classroom practice. For data analysis, pretest and posttest scores were processed to calculate gain scores, which were then normalized using the N-Gain formula to quantify relative improvement in learning activeness. Prior to conducting inferential analysis, assumptions of normality and homogeneity were checked using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Levene's tests respectively. With these assumptions satisfied, an independent-samples t-test (two-tailed) was conducted to determine whether the difference in gain scores between the experimental and control groups was statistically significant. A significance level of 0.05 was established as the threshold for decision-making. All statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which facilitated systematic data processing, hypothesis testing, and reporting of results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of descriptive statistics and normalized gain scores revealed a striking contrast between the experimental group taught with the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) technique and the control group taught through conventional lecture-based methods. Students in the experimental group achieved a mean N-Gain score of 0.7403, which falls within the high improvement category. By contrast, the control group recorded a mean N-Gain score of 0.1610, a value classified as low improvement. These findings already point to the conclusion that NHT contributed substantially to improving student activeness compared to traditional teaching methods. The implications of this difference extend beyond numerical representation. A high N-Gain score suggests that the intervention not only elevated students' engagement in the short term but also produced measurable growth in their willingness to participate, question, and collaborate. In CRE classrooms, where students often exhibit passive tendencies and default to rote memorization of biblical passages, such gains represent meaningful pedagogical progress. The experimental group's performance demonstrates that active, cooperative learning methods like NHT can counteract entrenched habits of passivity and create conditions conducive to meaningful engagement. Beyond the mean scores, a closer look at distributional patterns indicated that nearly all students in the experimental group demonstrated improvement across multiple indicators of activeness, such as task participation, contribution to group discussion, and responsibility for presenting answers. In the control group, however, improvements were limited to a small subset of students who were already predisposed toward active participation. This suggests that NHT has an equalizing effect: by holding each member accountable, it encourages participation from typically passive or reticent students.

To ensure the validity of statistical analysis, assumption tests were conducted prior to inferential testing. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances yielded $F = 1.006$ with a significance value of $p = .321$, demonstrating that the variances between the two groups were statistically homogeneous. This allowed the use of the independent-samples t-test under the assumption of equal variances. The subsequent t-test results provided robust evidence of the efficacy of NHT. The independent-samples t-test produced $t(52) = 12.859$ with a p-value of less than .001, well below the conventional threshold of 0.05. The mean difference between the groups was 0.57930, with a standard error of 0.04505, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from 0.48890 to 0.66970. These values confirm that the difference in gain scores between the experimental and control groups is not only statistically significant but also substantial in magnitude. The strength of this statistical evidence leaves little doubt that NHT produced a tangible impact on student activeness in CRE classes. While conventional instruction yielded only modest improvements, the NHT group exhibited transformative gains, validating the central hypothesis of the study that cooperative learning enhances student engagement in religious and character education.

Quantitative findings were further substantiated by qualitative observational data collected during the course of the intervention. Classroom observations revealed that students in the experimental group consistently displayed higher levels of verbal participation, greater initiative in asking reflective questions, and more frequent collaboration to solve problems compared to their peers in the control group. During NHT sessions, group dynamics visibly shifted. Students no longer relied solely on teacher direction but instead engaged actively with one another. When posed with a biblical or

moral question, group discussions were animated, with students pooling their knowledge and debating possible answers. The accountability mechanism - where any numbered student could be called upon to present the group's answer - ensured that all members prepared diligently. Observers noted instances where students encouraged quieter peers to speak up, creating a culture of mutual responsibility. Item-level analysis of questionnaire responses further supported these observations. Students who showed the most dramatic improvements on posttest scores were those who reported active involvement in peer discussions, information seeking, and group explanations - precisely the activities emphasized in NHT. Observational notes recorded multiple episodes of spontaneous peer teaching, where one student clarified a concept for another, thereby reinforcing both students' understanding. Such episodes were rare in the control group, where participation was largely limited to responding to teacher questions and copying notes.

Taken together, the statistical outcomes and observational data present a coherent picture: the implementation of NHT in CRE significantly enhanced student activeness compared to teacher-centred instruction. The substantial N-Gain and the highly significant t-test results confirm the superiority of NHT in this context. The underlying mechanisms can be understood through three complementary processes. First, accountability played a crucial role. In the NHT model, because any group member might be called upon to represent the group, all students were compelled to prepare and contribute to discussions. This feature transformed passive learners into active participants, reducing the possibility of social loafing - a common issue in group work where certain members rely on others to do the work. Second, peer instruction emerged as a central driver of engagement. In NHT, students explained concepts to one another, drawing on their own words and perspectives. This peer-to-peer explanation not only reinforced the explainer's mastery of the material but also scaffolded the understanding of the listener. The social dimension of learning - the sense of belonging, mutual encouragement, and joint accountability - created conditions for deeper engagement. Third, social interaction through group dialogue stimulated critical thinking. Students were encouraged to question, challenge, and defend their ideas in a supportive environment. This aligns closely with the constructivist view that knowledge is not transmitted but constructed through interaction and reflection. In CRE, where moral reasoning and application of biblical values are essential, such interaction provides an authentic medium for integrating faith with lived experience.

The findings of this study resonate strongly with theoretical perspectives and prior empirical research. Jerome Bruner's constructivist theory posits that discovery and active engagement lead to more meaningful learning than passive reception. The evidence from this study aligns with Bruner's principles, showing that students who actively engaged in NHT retained knowledge and applied it more effectively than those in lecture-based classrooms. The results also correspond with Vygotsky's social constructivist framework, which highlights the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in learning. By engaging in group discussion and peer teaching, students operated within their zone of proximal development, receiving support from peers that enabled them to achieve higher levels of understanding than they could independently. Empirically, this study's findings are consistent with prior research cited in the thesis literature review. For instance, Hutapea (2022) and Wulandari (2021) reported that NHT significantly increased student

participation and learning outcomes in mathematics and language learning contexts. By confirming similar benefits within CRE, this study extends the generalizability of NHT's effectiveness to religious and character education - a domain where activeness is particularly crucial for internalizing values. While the positive impact of NHT is evident, the study also surfaced several practical considerations that merit attention. Teachers noted that implementing NHT required substantial preparation. Crafting meaningful prompts, designing discussion questions that stimulate reflection, and managing group dynamics placed additional demands on instructional planning. These challenges underscore the need for teacher training and professional development in cooperative learning methods. Some learners, accustomed to years of passive engagement, initially displayed reluctance or discomfort in transitioning to active roles. Teachers had to provide scaffolding, encouragement, and gradual withdrawal of support to help students adapt to the new learning style. Over time, most students overcame these initial hurdles, but the process highlights the importance of patient facilitation. The study was conducted in a single school with purposively selected classes, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Reliance on self-report questionnaires, while valuable, introduced potential subjectivity in measuring activeness. Although observational triangulation mitigated this to some extent, future research should employ mixed-method approaches with more rigorous observational protocols. Furthermore, the intervention was relatively short, covering only a series of lessons. Longer-term studies would be needed to determine whether the gains in activeness are sustained over time. The study provides important implications for practice. For teachers of Christian Religious Education, the evidence suggests that structured cooperative techniques like NHT can transform classroom dynamics, shifting students from passive listeners to active participants. Beyond improving engagement, NHT fosters character virtues integral to CRE, such as responsibility, honesty, respect, and mutual care. The accountability built into NHT ensures that students learn to value collective success and contribute fairly to group outcomes. For school leaders, the study highlights the importance of supporting teacher professional development in cooperative learning strategies. Workshops, mentoring, and collaborative lesson planning could equip teachers with the necessary skills to design and implement NHT effectively. Curriculum planners and policymakers should also consider integrating cooperative learning models more explicitly into instructional guidelines, recognizing that student-centred methods are consistent with the national curriculum's goals of cultivating both knowledge and character. The findings carry implications for the broader discourse on Christian education. By demonstrating that NHT not only increases academic engagement but also reinforces moral values, the study affirms the integrative mission of CRE. Cooperative learning aligns with biblical principles of fellowship, mutual service, and accountability, making NHT not just a pedagogical tool but also a practice consistent with the theological aims of Christian education.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the influence of the Numbered Heads Together (NHT) technique on the learning activeness of Grade IX students in Christian Religious Education

(CRE) and Character Formation at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon. Grounded in the national curriculum's emphasis on active learning and character building, the research sought to address a persistent challenge in CRE classrooms: the tendency of students to remain passive, rely heavily on rote memorization, and demonstrate limited engagement in applying biblical teachings to everyday life. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that NHT is not only effective in enhancing student participation but also in aligning classroom practices with the holistic goals of Christian education. The results demonstrated a striking difference between the experimental group taught through NHT and the control group instructed with conventional methods. The mean N-Gain score of the experimental group (0.7403) fell into the high improvement category, while the control group's mean score (0.1610) indicated only minimal progress. These results were further reinforced by an independent-samples t-test ($t = 12.859$, $p < .001$), confirming that the improvements in the experimental group were not due to chance but represented a statistically significant and substantial effect of the NHT model. Such findings highlight that NHT, with its emphasis on group accountability and cooperative discussion, creates conditions that foster consistent activeness, critical dialogue, and peer-supported learning.

Observational data added depth to the statistical results. Students in the experimental group demonstrated increased verbal participation, asked more reflective and higher-order questions, and engaged more willingly in collaborative problem-solving tasks. The accountability feature of NHT - where any student number could be called to present the group's answer - ensured that all group members prepared and contributed actively. This mechanism was particularly effective in encouraging students who had previously remained silent in conventional lessons to take ownership of their learning. These behavioral shifts are essential in CRE, where active engagement with Scripture and moral reasoning is central to nurturing faith and character. The significance of these findings lies not only in academic outcomes but also in their contribution to the broader mission of Christian education. By fostering collaboration, responsibility, and mutual respect, NHT aligns with biblical principles of fellowship and stewardship. The cooperative nature of the technique provided a practical avenue for students to embody values such as honesty, accountability, and empathy - values that are central to the curriculum of Christian Religious Education and Character Formation. In this way, NHT does not merely improve classroom participation but also supports the deeper goal of shaping students into responsible and faith-driven individuals. The implementation of NHT is not without challenges. Teachers reported that the approach demanded additional preparation, including designing appropriate questions, facilitating group discussions, and allocating sufficient classroom time. Some students, especially those accustomed to passive roles, initially struggled to adjust to the active, participatory expectations of NHT. These challenges suggest that successful implementation requires careful scaffolding, ongoing teacher facilitation, and adequate institutional support in terms of time allocation and professional training. Despite these limitations, the positive gains observed in this study outweigh the challenges, suggesting that the investment of time and resources is justified. The research also has methodological limitations that open pathways for further study. The use of purposive sampling in a single school limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should replicate this research across multiple schools, diverse contexts,

and larger sample sizes to confirm the external validity of NHT's impact. Additionally, while the six-week intervention demonstrated significant short-term gains, longer-term studies are needed to determine whether improvements in activeness are sustained over time and how these changes influence broader outcomes such as moral reasoning, academic achievement, and faith commitment. The instruments used in this study, though validated, may benefit from refinement to reduce ambiguities in measuring indicators such as "discussion" or "application." Pairing quantitative tools with richer qualitative methods - such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observations - could provide more nuanced insights into how cooperative learning shapes both activeness and character formation. This study affirms that the Numbered Heads Together technique is an effective and practical pedagogical strategy for enhancing learning activeness in Christian Religious Education at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon. By fostering accountability, peer collaboration, and reflective engagement, NHT not only increases student participation but also advances the broader goals of Christian education: the cultivation of faith, responsibility, and character. While challenges of preparation, adaptation, and scope remain, the evidence suggests that NHT holds great promise as a model for revitalizing CRE classrooms and aligning them with the national vision of producing academically capable and morally grounded citizens.

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