



## LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE IN EFFECTIVE GROUP COLLABORATION

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### | Abstract

This research explores the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) in group decision-making and its impact on language awareness. NGT, introduced in 1971, involves structured problem-solving through written communication, fostering creativity and equal participation. It enhances language precision, encouraging clear and professional communication among group members. NGT also promotes active listening and critical thinking. The paper outlines the five key NGT steps and underscores the unique role of group facilitators. NGT's strengths include effective opinion identification, equal participation, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills development. However, it has limitations, such as inflexibility and potential participant dominance. Training programs are crucial for successful NGT implementation.

### | Keywords

*Nominal Group Technique, Group collaboration, Decision-making process*

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## 1. Introduction

To date, group work or group discussion has been widely applied in various professions as it provides equal opportunity for participants to express their ideas and take part in the decision-making process. It also highlights the proactiveness of group members in cooperation. The concept of Nominal Group Technique (hereafter is called NGT) was first introduced by Van de Ven and Delbecq (1971) focusing on group structured problems, elaborating the efficacy of different phases from the ideas generation process, voting activities to final decision-making. During these stages, the degree of participant involvement is gauged to exemplify the effectiveness of this NGT approach. This writing aims to delve into the NGT theory in terms

of the group decision-making process, its procedures as well as advantages versus disadvantages and also highlights the unique key roles of group facilitators.

## **2. The Overview of Nominal Group Technique**

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT), introduced in the 1960s, has found widespread application in diverse fields such as healthcare, education, business, and policymaking (Chapple & Murphy, 1996; Harvey & Holmes, 2012). Van de Ven and Delbecq (1971) describe NGT as a structured problem-solving approach that encourages written communication over oral interaction, addressing the creativity limitations of brainstorming. NGT offers a platform for in-depth perspectives, synthesizing ideas toward mutual consensus goals (Humphrey-Murto et al., 2023).

Dowling and Louis (2000) endorse NGT as a widely used method for eliciting qualitative information in structured group processes, enhancing decision-making and result harmonization. Lloyd (2011) distinguishes NGT from other group decision-making approaches by providing equivalent opportunities for individual contributions, with each perception reviewed and prioritized for mutual agreement.

Additionally, Horton (1980) notes the frustration arising from unproductive communication in traditional decision-making, highlighting NGT's suitability for innovative decision-making that prioritizes the selection of the best ideas and most agreeable solutions, rather than rigid adherence to predefined procedures.

## **3. How Nominal Group Technique Enhances Language Awareness**

This nominal group approach fosters balance among participants during the discussion period, where all ideas are considered equal before the voting stage. There is no hierarchical structure, and the group leader functions as a facilitator to ensure the proper execution of multiple stages of NGT, rather than assuming an authoritative role (Dang, 2015; Horton, 1980). However, it's essential to maintain equality and refrain from arguments during the idea generation phase to promote coequal perspectives and prevent criticism or rejection (Harvey & Holmes, 2012).

NGT significantly enhances language awareness and encourages precise communication among group members. Since members' opinions are meticulously recorded in written form, a distinctive feature of NGT, all participants should be conscious of their language choices, emphasizing clarity, unambiguity, and comprehensibility. Contributors are inclined to pay close attention to their word selection as it directly reflects their thoughts. Additionally, these written notes should not be altered by anyone in the group. Depending on the type of meetings, tasks, or contexts, despite NGT's non-threatening nature (Lloyd, 2011), participants should use less ambiguous, polite, and professional language when providing comments on others' ideas. Peer feedback should be expressed using constructive language, showcasing critical thinking and higher-order thinking skills (Lintangsari et al., 2022).

Moreover, NGT enhances active listening. For example, in a classroom scenario, students were tasked with improving academic writing skills. They formed groups of 5 to 7 and discussed the best three solutions within a 5-minute timeframe. Initially, each member privately recorded their ideas, then shared and exchanged views with the group. This step required students to be acutely aware of their language choices since their expressions would be documented and assessed. All opinions were evaluated, and peer

feedback was obtained to ensure the clarity of explanations. This highlighted the effectiveness of meaningful communication through the conveyed messages and, conversely, indicated areas where adjustments were needed.

#### **4. The Steps in Conducting an NGT Session**

Despite the applied fields of this NGT, to achieve efficient outcomes, the framework of this approach is strictly followed with following five steps below. In terms of teaching and learning, an example of collecting suggested solutions for improving academic writing is chosen for illustrative purposes.

##### **Phase 1 – Introduction to The Issue**

In academic writing sessions, the teacher wished to obtain students' point of view about the most challenging factors that prevent them from improving their academic writing skills and what are their suggested solutions. The class was divided into small groups of 8 students in each group. The setting of the classroom was also modified to parallel position so that students can sit and discuss face-to-face. Students were asked to prepare a note to write down their ideas privately.

##### **Phase 2 – Silent Ideas Generation**

In given timebound (in this case, 5 minutes), each student lists down their thoughts about the addressed issue silently without any needed clarification. At this point, students do not need to interact with their partners but work on their own to develop self's opinions.

##### **Phase 3 – Discussion or Round Robin Phase & Clarification**

Within a group, one student was picked as a facilitator. This student would carefully record all members' ideas shared during the group discussion. Comments, feedback, or clarifications were noted down as well. If unbalanced conversations happened, the role of this facilitator was to manage, immediately reduce conflicts and maintain neutral dialogues. The given time for the discussion stage was usually about 10 minutes.

##### **Phase 4 – Voting or Ranking Solutions**

When all opinions were collected, the voting phase to find the top solution took place. The facilitator, with his/ her notes, invited all participants to rank the most appropriate solutions. In this case, because the context and the class size are relatively moderate, simple voting method was conducted manually. With larger sample size, the assistance of technology applications would be beneficial to calculate the votes. The duration of this ranking step depends on how fast the mutual agreement is achieved. In this example, it took 5 minutes to elicit the best suggestions for academic writing improvement.

##### **Phase 5 – Display Final Result**

After voting, each group has their own ultimate answers. The facilitators of each group then presented these answers to the lecture and the whole class. At this stage, critical thinking was encouraged and obviously, persuasive skill was too explicated.

## 5. Key Roles of NGT Facilitator

Unlike other decision-making approaches, in NGT the roles and responsibilities of the group leader, or as known as the facilitator, are uniquely distinguished. Though the facilitator still stays in the group as a member, he or she neither devotes their ideas nor comments on others' perspectives, according to O'Neil and Jackson (1983). Rather, the group leader strives to maintain the neutral vision and control the group process which is significantly adhered to NGT framework. O'Neil and Jackson (1983) also listed out several key responsibilities of NGT facilitator such as performing a balanced viewpoint, avoiding rewording participants' written ideas, preventing debates between group members, etc. Not to mention, a group facilitator plays a role as a information collector and remains neutral receiver throughout the NGT process.

In fact, an effective group facilitator contributes to the success of implementation of NGT in group decision-making. To demonstrate, if a facilitator deeply comprehends purposes of each stage, he or she will constantly facilitate group members and accommodates quiet participants by asking questions which could trigger underpinned ideas. Additionally, if there is a tendency of dominance, a facilitator can stop the challenge and pull the discussion back to the neutral state.

Furthermore, Chapple and Murphy (1996), through their study of the influence of group leaders, revealed the insight of students when they were assigned in the facilitator role. The statements were group facilitators expressed their anxiety and uncertainty when it comes to remain the stableness, neutral vibes and ensure NGT phases were completely followed. To imply NGT properly, a thorough training program for a determined group facilitator should be conducted in advance.

In short, the steps of NGT are summarized as follows.



## 6. . Advantages versus Drawbacks of NGT in Group Discussion

### 6.1.. Strengths of NGT

#### *Identification of Individual's Opinions*

In accordance with Chapple and Murphy (1996), NGT provides more insight into one's concerns in comparison with survey forms addressing unchanged and straightforward options. Whilst surveys or questionnaires merely indicate controlled answers with very limited chances for participants to fully express their perspectives, NGT balances this drawback by provoking self's viewpoint thoroughly in a reasonable timeframe. Through discussions, individuals' concerns are shared and even debated to reach the most prioritized outcomes. By doing so, members are equally encouraged to speak and exchange their points, more importantly, to challenge themselves to persuade others with their choices. In terms of applying NGT in classroom to seek for solutions, during the discussion stage, the teacher walked around the classroom and listened to group conversations without any interruption happened; students were freely expressing

their opinions. As a result, plenty of distinguished ideas were established because of learner's differences. All ideas were then ranked to address the most agreeable answers.

#### *Equality of Opportunity*

Since the silent phase allows participants to deliberately express their thoughts without interacting with others verbally, individuals are free from unwanted discussion, subjective bias, or dominant influence. Creativity, henceforth, can be maximized. Additionally, Lloyd (2011) emphasized that with this NGT people can make use of others' knowledge and experience to fulfill their missing backgrounds. In fact, this action could support the inexperienced members since they could take this opportunity to enrich their knowledge. He also stated that NGT ensures that all ideas are thoroughly reviewed and discussed to reach the best solutions in the final stage, addressing the well balance input of a whole group. So as NGT is a non-hierarchical model, everyone's voice is considered identical. Dominance, if presents, should be reduced to the least; in contrast, the art of triggering incompetent members should be practiced accommodating them to co-join the decision-making process.

#### *Provoking Critical Thinking*

Pursuant to the thorough consideration of individual's perspectives and contributions, the possibility of diverse ideas is highly existed. To select top priorities solutions to the addressed issues, critical thinking skills and evaluation skills are necessary. During the discussion phase, participants ought to convince others to protect their standpoints; on the other hand, the rest of the group listen and execute critical thinking. Specifically, when it comes to educational context, Lintang Sari et al. (2022) pointed out that in their study that NGT certainly promoted critical thinking of students through discussion online due to the affection of covid pandemic period. That experimental test result revealed that NGT has improved students' critical thinking and proactiveness compared to students experienced only with brainstorming technique.

#### *Enhancing Problem-solving Ability*

NGT prepares students with sets of practical skills which are fundamental in the labor market such as critical thinking and problem solving. As NGT mostly deals with structural issues, through its procedures, NGT requires the participation of all group members. Even quiet participants, to some extent, must embark themselves into the discussion stage (Chapple & Murphy, 1996). Indeed, through NGT process, quite joiners have opportunities to acquire proper steps when encountering a problem through proposing ideas, exchanging views, clarifying ideas, and eliminating redundancies to reach the utmost solutions. For instance, students understand that an issue is first identified and generally overviewed, then a problem can be shattered into smaller components giving students closer look in various angles, then ideas are systematically collected. As a result, students can be exposed to in-depth understanding and potentially propose concise solutions.

### **6.2. . Drawbacks of NGT**

#### *Inflexibility Structural Process*

Although NGT has been considered the ultimate approach for group decision making, researchers argued that this technique is also problematic. Bartunek and Murnighan (1984) pointed out that due to the

fixedness of its structures, NGT merely facilitates structural issues; for non-structural ones, it seems ineffective. Consequently, the mutual agreement between participants is unachievable. In other words, topic discussion cannot be changed once it is implemented in the discussion (Dunham, 1998). Further, since NGT appoints only one solution, other suggestions seem neglected and unmodified.

### *Issues of Group Size*

Alongside, group size is arguable. There is no concrete confirmation of the most appropriate number of people in a group that is well applicable for NGT method; even larger group obtain no more ideas than the small one (Dennis & Valacich, 1994). Few studies suggest that NGT works best for relatively small groups which are less than twelve (Harvey & Holmes, 2012; Horton, 1980). In fact, the increasement of participants contrasts with their opportunities in contribution (Dowling & Louis, 2000). Due to time limitations, if the group is too large, not all members' perspectives can be heard and consequently, their contributions are probably imbalanced and passed over.

### *Time-consuming and Difficulty in Analyzing Mixed Data*

As NGT is finely structured, conducting this approach is essentially adhered to its procedures with various steps to reach fruitful outcomes. As previously mentioned, each phase has its own advantages that should be strictly followed so that everyone has their equality and opportunity to devote their best. Hence, going through all necessary phases can be in just a blink of eye. It is dependent on each type of task and the size of group; time management is a significant factor.

Further, McMillan et al. (2014) stated the difficulties when it comes to analyzing outcomes across multiple nominal groups. This is undeniably time-consuming with loads of mixed data. Hence, alternatives analysis methods were suggested to exemplify the diversity between groups. Also, those researchers suggested that in case the contextual theme of decision making is relatively crucial, re-voting should be considered as this action reflects more precise priorities. In other words, if the first voting round does not provide an acceptable outcome, or if there are additional ideas to be considered, the voting frequency can be executed.

### *Domination of Vocal Participants*

Besides, arbitrary aspects should be avoided when forming a nominal group. In the study of measuring the effectiveness of nominal group statistics in collaboration, Wright (2007) claimed that the attribution of an individual into a nominal group should be cautiously considered. Although the voices of all participants are likely to be heard, it is doubtful that individuals are treated at the same level in the nominal group. Mentioned in the empirical research of Chapple and Murphy (1996), there was hesitation of inexperienced participants to give out their thoughts since they did not want to become antagonistic towards the majority. Indeed, it is true that the dominance sense of group influence still exists. Therefore, valuable information might be unnoted, and the results might be unreliable. To mitigate this issue, several techniques to enhance group collaboration shall be discussed closely in later parts of this paper. On the other hand, Dowling and Louis (2000) claimed that NGT requires physical appearance of groups members making it somewhat effortful to organize. Thus, in their study of *"computer-assisted asynchronous approach"* as an implementation of NGT (p.230), they exemplified the effectiveness of this NGT without physical

attendances to minimize expenses in operation. Their attempt was potential in reducing organizational costs; however, NGT was not clearly applicable due to different degrees of adopting and adapting this technique.

## 7.. Conclusion

In conclusion, NGT has gained widespread acceptance across diverse fields due to its ability to facilitate the exchange of participant opinions and treat final outcomes as collective contributions. Moreover, NGT significantly bolsters language awareness. With the exception of the silent idea generation phase, participants are required to meticulously choose their words, effectively express ideas, persuade others, and protect their viewpoints, even challenging ambiguous statements. The NGT process fosters the development of essential communication, critical thinking, and evaluation skills. While NGT generally aids decision-making positively, it is imperative to carefully consider its limitations in various contexts. Therefore, comprehensive training programs for both group facilitators and members are crucial to ensure a clear understanding of its purpose, adaptability, and successful implementation.

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