

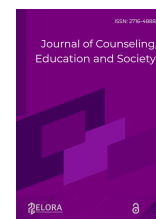


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A convergent parallel mixed-methods study of peer-mediated creative partnership on critical thinking and reading comprehension among Indonesian EFL senior high school students

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ABSTRACT

This convergent parallel mixed-methods study examined the effect of a six-week, peer-mediated Creative Partnership intervention on the critical thinking and reading comprehension of 32 senior high school EFL students (aged 15–17, intermediate/CEFR B1 proficiency) at a senior high school in East Java, Indonesia, and explored how the intervention reshaped classroom interaction. Quantitative data were collected using a researcher-developed, expert-validated pre-/post-test measuring literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension aligned with Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) and analyzed with a paired-sample t-test and Cohen's d. Qualitative data classroom observation (Cohen's $\kappa = .82$), semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals were analyzed through the thematic coding procedure of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Results indicated a statistically significant overall gain in reading comprehension, $t(31) = 10.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [13.44, 20.14], with a very large effect size ($d = 1.81$); evaluative comprehension improved the most (36.4%, $d = 2.35$), followed by inferential (29.4%, $d = 2.15$) and literal comprehension (19.3%, $d = 1.84$). Thematic analysis identified four convergent patterns: dialogic co-construction of meaning, emergence of critical and reflective thinking, collaborative creativity and engagement, and the teacher's repositioning as co-learner. The integration of both strands suggests that structured creative partnership functions as a cognitive, social, and affective scaffold that moves students from literal decoding toward higher-order interpretation. Findings support Creative Partnership as a promising pedagogical model for developing critical thinking and reading comprehension in EFL classrooms, while the single-group, single-site design underscores the need for controlled, multi-site replication before broad claims of effectiveness are warranted.



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Introduction

Twenty-first-century English education increasingly requires learners not only to acquire linguistic competence but also to develop higher-order cognitive skills that support academic and social success (Yulian & Pontianak,

2021; Ilyas et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2025). Among these competencies, critical thinking and reading comprehension are foundational, enabling students to understand, evaluate, and synthesize information from increasingly complex texts (Rachmawati et al., 2022; Sinaga et al., 2023; Alshehri et al., 2024). Yet in many EFL classrooms in Indonesia, teachers continue to rely on teacher-centered instruction dominated by surface-level literal questions, leaving little room for dialogic engagement with text (Megania et al., 2024; Khoiriyah & Farah, 2024; Sa'ada & Umroh, 2025). Consequently, students often comprehend only what is explicitly stated and struggle to draw inferences, evaluate authorial intent, or connect texts to their own experience (Syukri & Karmini, 2022; Khoiriyah & Farah, 2024; Rohmah et al., 2026).

Despite a growing body of instructional innovations, three specific gaps remain unresolved in the EFL literature. First, most collaborative-learning studies report cognitive outcomes and affective/experiential outcomes separately rather than triangulating both strands within a single design, which fragments understanding of how collaboration produces cognitive gain (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Second, empirical evidence on structured, dialogic “creative partnership” pedagogy distinct from generic project-based or think-pair-share activities in that it foregrounds sustained peer co-authorship of meaning remains scarce in Indonesian secondary EFL contexts (Herawati et al., 2025). Third, few intervention studies in this field report effect sizes alongside significance tests, which limits the comparability of reported reading-comprehension gains across studies (Amumpuni et al., 2025). The present study addresses these three gaps directly.

In response, this study investigates how a Creative Partnership Model operationalized as a structured, six-week program of joint text interpretation, dialogic discussion circles, and creative re-authoring tasks conducted between peers and supported by teacher facilitation affects the critical thinking and reading comprehension of senior high school EFL students. The study's contribution lies in its dual focus on cognitive outcomes (test performance) and classroom experience (interaction and participation), examined jointly through a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (QUAN + QUAL) (Khotimah et al., 2021; D. P. Aulia et al., 2023; Herawati et al., 2025). By integrating quantitative test data with qualitative observations, interviews, and learner reflections, the study offers an evidence-based account of how the Creative Partnership Model influences the learning process and supports the development of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

This research has three objectives: To examine how the Creative Partnership Model affects students' capacity for critical thinking and text interpretation. To investigate how the model changes classroom interaction, reading engagement, and collaborative meaning-making. To assess students' and the teacher's perceptions of the model's effectiveness in addressing the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. By combining numerical and narrative evidence, the study aims to inform teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking evidence-based, dialogic instructional strategies for developing critical thinking and reading comprehension in EFL classrooms.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation to develop a fuller understanding of the intervention's effects than either strand could provide alone (Dawadi et al., 2021; Andrianatos, 2025; Habibullah et al., 2025). This design was selected because the study's objectives required both an estimate of the magnitude of cognitive change (quantitative) and a contextualized account of how that change occurred through classroom interaction (qualitative) (Zabala & Dayaganon, 2023).

Participants and Context

Participants were 32 Grade XI students (18 female, 14 male; aged 15–17) and one English teacher with eight years of teaching experience, drawn from a single intact class at MA Matholi'ul Anwar, East Java, Indonesia. A purposive homogeneous sampling strategy was used: the class was selected because it was the only cohort at the school meeting the study's inclusion criteria, namely (a) intermediate English proficiency, operationally defined as a score of 60–74 on the school's standardized English placement test (approximately CEFR B1), (b) minimum 90% attendance across the intervention period, and (c) no prior participation in an explicit creative-partnership, process-drama, or similar dialogic-collaborative program. Students receiving concurrent private English tutoring focused on test preparation were excluded to reduce confounding. This purposive, single-site sampling strategy was chosen to maximize homogeneity for thematic depth and comparability of pre-existing proficiency, and is acknowledged as a limitation for statistical generalizability (see Limitations); the intervention's transferability to other contexts should be assessed by readers against the contextual detail provided here rather than assumed. A post hoc power analysis, based on the observed effect size ($d = 1.81$) and $n = 32$ paired observations, indicated statistical power exceeding .99 at $\alpha = .05$, well above the conventional .80 threshold, although this power estimate is necessarily descriptive rather than confirmatory since it was not specified a priori.

The study obtained ethical approval from an Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. EDU-CPM-2024-11) and secured informed consent from all student participants and their guardians, as well as the participating teacher. The intervention comprised 12 instructional meetings (twice weekly, approximately 90 minutes each) across six weeks.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Multiple instruments were used to triangulate cognitive, behavioral, and perceptual data.

Reading Comprehension Tests. Parallel pre- and post-test forms were developed to measure literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension, aligned with Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Kaowiwattanakul, 2025; Xie et al., 2021). Items underwent expert validation and pilot testing for clarity, difficulty, and discrimination index; internal reliability was Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$. The pre-test was administered in Week 1 to establish baseline performance, and the post-test was administered at the end of Week 6.

Structured Classroom Observation. Six lessons were observed using an interactional coding framework adapted from Mercer and Littleton's (2007) exploratory-talk framework, informed by recent applications of dialogic-discourse coding in EFL settings (Ali et al., 2024; Laird-gentle et al., 2023). Two independent observers achieved inter-rater reliability of Cohen's $\kappa = .82$. Observations were distributed across three phases: orientation and baseline (Weeks 1–2; 3 lessons), creative-partnership activities (Weeks 3–5; 5 lessons), and reflection/post-assessment (Week 6; 1 lesson).

Semi-Structured Interviews. Ten students and the teacher were interviewed in two rounds (mid-intervention, Week 3; post-intervention, Week 6; 20–30 minutes each) to explore perceptions of creative partnership, dialogic interaction, and reflective engagement. Member checking of transcripts supported interpretive trustworthiness, consistent with recommended practice for credibility in applied-linguistics qualitative research (Riazi et al., 2023).

Reflective Journals and Creative Artifacts. Weekly journals and group creative projects (story rewrites, dramatizations, multimodal tasks), submitted every Friday, provided thick descriptive evidence of higher-order interpretive engagement.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS 26. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, gain scores) summarized comprehension growth. Prior to inferential testing, the normality of the pre-post difference scores was checked with the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W(31) = .96, p = .27$), supporting the parametric assumption for a paired-sample t-test. A paired-sample t-test then assessed overall pre-post differences, with Cohen's d (computed from the t-statistic and, for each subscale, from pooled pre/post standard deviations) reported as the effect-size estimate alongside 95% confidence intervals, consistent with recommendations for transparent effect-size reporting in EFL intervention research (Amumpuni et al., 2025).

Qualitative data were analyzed following the thematic-coding procedure of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014): data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Triangulation was pursued at three levels data triangulation (tests, interviews, journals, observations), methodological triangulation (concurrent quantitative-qualitative strands), and investigator triangulation (dual coding, $\kappa > .80$).

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility (member checking, prolonged six-week engagement, methodological triangulation), dependability (an audit trail of coding decisions and an analytic journal), confirmability (reflexive journaling to monitor researcher bias), and transferability (thick contextual description enabling readers to judge applicability to similar EFL settings) (Guen et al., 2025; Riazi et al., 2023).

Ethical Considerations

All procedures followed institutional ethical protocols for educational research. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were protected throughout data collection, storage, and reporting.

Results and Discussions

Result

Overview of the Intervention

The Creative Partnership Model was implemented in one English classroom over six weeks with 32 students and one teacher, structured in three developmental phases: (1) preparation and baseline assessment (Weeks 1–2), including diagnostic assessment and orientation to partnership norms; (2) creative-partnership activities (Weeks 3–5), including joint text interpretation, discussion circles, role play, reflective journaling, and creative

project work; and (3) reflection and summative assessment (Week 6), including post-assessment, focus-group discussion, and reflective interviews. Throughout, the teacher acted as both facilitator and co-learner, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the More Knowledgeable Other, while ceding agency to students to co-construct meaning.

Tabel 1. Quantitative Findings: Reading Comprehension Performance

Indicator	Pre-test <i>M</i>	Post-test <i>M</i>	Mean gain	SD pre	SD post	% improvement	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Literal comprehension	68.12	81.25	+13.13	7.82	6.34	19.3%	1.84
Inferential comprehension	59.37	76.84	+17.47	8.95	7.18	29.4%	2.15
Evaluative comprehension	54.28	74.06	+19.78	9.14	7.63	36.4%	2.35
Overall mean	60.59	77.38	+16.79	8.63	7.05	27.7%	1.81

Note. Cohen's *d* for the overall score was computed from the paired *t*-statistic ($d = t/\sqrt{n}$); subscale *d*s were computed from pooled pre-/post-test standard deviations as an approximation, since correlation between paired scores per subscale was not separately modeled. All values exceed conventional thresholds for a "large" effect ($d \geq 0.80$).

A paired-sample *t*-test confirmed a statistically significant improvement from pre-test to post-test, $t(31) = 10.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI for the mean gain [13.44, 20.14]. The largest gain occurred in evaluative comprehension, suggesting that activities emphasizing reflection, argumentation, and synthesis central features of the creative-partnership tasks disproportionately supported higher-order interpretive ability relative to literal decoding.

These effect sizes are considerably larger than those typically reported for collaborative-reading interventions in comparable EFL contexts. For example, collaborative and scaffolding-based reading interventions have been associated with moderate-to-large gains in comprehension and reduced reading anxiety (Ibrahim et al., 2023), dialogic-technology-integrated ESP instruction has produced significant but more modest comprehension gains than observed here (Ali et al., 2024), and strategic-reading interventions differentiated by students' critical-thinking level have shown that lower-order gains (literal) are typically easier to achieve than higher-order gains (evaluative) (Amumpuni et al., 2025) a pattern consistent with the present ordering of gains (evaluative > inferential > literal). This convergence with prior findings supports a theoretical explanation grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development: peer and teacher-mediated dialogue appears to extend students' capacity to perform evaluative reasoning that would be difficult to achieve independently, a mechanism corroborated in recent EFL dialogic-scaffolding research (Lepola et al., 2025; Bouwer & Veen, 2023; Susilowaty et al., 2025). The comparatively large magnitude of gains observed in this study should nonetheless be interpreted cautiously given the absence of a comparison group (see Limitations).

Qualitative Findings: Case Study Analysis

Qualitative data classroom observation field notes, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and creative group artifacts were analyzed using the thematic-coding procedure of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Four salient, convergent themes emerged.

Theme 1: Co-Construction of Meaning and Dialogic Learning. Classroom discourse shifted from monologic to dialogic forms. The teacher used open-ended prompts (e.g., "What do you think the author wanted us to feel?") to provoke interpretive negotiation. One exchange during a short-story analysis illustrates this shift:

Teacher: "Do you all agree the protagonist is selfish?" Student A: "Maybe not selfish, but confused. He helps others later." Student B: "Yes, but the author still criticizes the protagonist. It's about making choices."

A student later reflected: "Previously, I was hesitant to speak out because I could be incorrect. Now we can exchange ideas. Occasionally my friends' opinions push me to think differently" (Student 14). This pattern reaffirms the sociocultural view that learning is a socially mediated activity in which knowledge is built through interaction and negotiation (Vygotsky, 1978; Ali et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Emergence of Critical and Reflective Thinking. Across journal entries and interviews, students moved from retelling texts (e.g., "The story is about a girl who lost her book") toward analytical and evaluative reflection by Week 5 (e.g., "The story shows how sometimes people hide when they feel sad; I think the author wants people to be honest"). This qualitative shift indicates movement along Bloom's taxonomy from understanding toward analyzing and evaluating (Xie et al., 2021; Kaowiwattanakul, 2025). In one creative task, students rewrote the ending of "The Necklace" to emphasize honesty over materialism, reflecting: "Thinking of a new ending helped us to understand the message in a deeper way" evidence that students moved beyond comprehension toward authorial re-interpretation of the text.

Theme 3: Collaborative Creativity and Engagement. Observations documented a shift from passive to active participation, with equitable role distribution and peer scaffolding. Students constructed collaborative “mind maps” linking character motives and thematic connections, and reported preferring creative tasks over conventional question-answering (“I like it better being creative ... we can tell stories, make posters, or do skits,” Student 7). This is consistent with theories of creative collaboration positing that novel interpretation emerges through interaction rather than solitary contemplation (Sawyer, 2012), a pattern corroborated in recent studies of project-based and dialogic EFL activity (Suharto et al., 2023; Lia & Khulel, 2025).

Theme 4: Teacher as Co-Learner and Reflective Practitioner. The teacher described an initial concern about relinquishing classroom control, followed by a shift toward facilitation: “I was worried that the conversations would be a mess at first. But I learned that when I make room, the students will manage themselves. My role shifted from correcting to guiding” (Teacher interview, Week 6). This repositioning aligns with dialogical pedagogy, in which teacher and students mutually shape the learning process (Freire, 1970), and is echoed in recent accounts of teachers’ evolving facilitator identity in constructivist EFL classrooms (Panggabean & Misykah, 2025; Handoko et al., 2025).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Integrating both strands indicates that quantitative comprehension gains were not isolated from, but directly connected to, the qualitative shifts in classroom interaction. The 19.3% gain in literal comprehension aligned with observed collaborative reading and peer annotation; the 29.4% gain in inferential comprehension aligned with dialogic discussion practices that exposed students to multiple interpretive lenses; and the 36.4% gain in evaluative comprehension aligned with creative re-authoring and reflective journaling, both of which required personal judgment and synthesis. This joint display of evidence supports the conclusion that the Creative Partnership Model functioned as a multidimensional learning scaffold operating simultaneously on cognitive (dialogic reasoning), social (negotiation and co-construction), and affective (motivation, agency, confidence) dimensions (Akmali & Kusaeri, 2024; Novita & Arifmiboy, 2023).

Discussion

Taken together, these findings indicate that the Creative Partnership Model was associated with statistically and practically significant gains in EFL students’ reading comprehension and with qualitative evidence of increased dialogic engagement, critical reflection, and collaborative creativity (Rahmatika, 2025; Salsabila et al., 2023). This pattern is consistent with sociocultural accounts of learning, in which dialogic and collaborative processes are central mechanisms of cognitive growth (Susilowati et al., 2024; Amumpuni et al., 2025).

The largest gains in evaluative comprehension are consistent with prior work showing that reflective, dialogic, and creative-authorship tasks disproportionately support higher-order comprehension relative to more procedural, literal-level tasks (N. S. Aulia & Retnosari, 2025; Kaowiwattanakul, 2025). The literal-comprehension gains are consistent with research on peer-mediated shared reading, in which collaborative annotation provides scaffolding for vocabulary and textual-cue identification (Zakiya & Hima, 2023; Juliana & Anggraini, 2024; Fadia & Mahmuddin, 2025). The inferential-comprehension gains are consistent with research on collaborative strategic reading and interpretive negotiation as mechanisms for inference-making (Sulistiyani et al., 2022; Philosophy et al., 2024).

Qualitatively, the shift from monologic to dialogic classroom discourse mirrors findings on exploratory talk and collaborative inquiry as mechanisms of meaning construction (Bouwer & Veen, 2023; Ali et al., 2024; Rahardini, 2025), consistent with Mercer and Littleton’s (2007) argument that reasoning develops through exploratory talk, and with Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, in which learners accomplish more with guided collaboration than independently (Rachmawati et al., 2022; Kurniawan, 2022; Laird-gentle et al., 2023). Students’ growing comfort with ambiguity and intellectual risk-taking parallels findings on ZPD-oriented reading pedagogy (Arifin & Laili, 2022; Gillies, 2023; Safitri & Sari, 2025) and on peer-mediated confidence-building in collaborative reading tasks (Lepola et al., 2025; Susilowaty et al., 2025).

The observed increase in collaborative engagement is consistent with Sawyer’s (2012) theory that creative ideas emerge through interaction, and with recent findings that project-based and dialogic activities increase EFL students’ motivation and engagement (Suharto et al., 2023; Ketut et al., 2024; Lia & Khulel, 2025). The teacher’s repositioning from authority figure to co-learner reflects Freire’s (1970) dialogical pedagogy and aligns with recent research on teachers’ evolving facilitator role in constructivist classrooms (Ariyanto et al., 2023; Panggabean & Misykah, 2025; Cahyono & Rusiadi, 2025).

Limitations. Several limitations temper these findings. First, the single-group pre-/post-test design without a comparison or control group means that alternative explanations for the observed gains test-retest familiarity, maturation over the six-week period, and Hawthorne-type effects from increased attention and novelty cannot be statistically ruled out, although the convergence of quantitative gains with independently coded qualitative

evidence of changed classroom practice, and the theoretical coherence of the pattern of gains (evaluative > inferential > literal) with the intervention's design, make a pure test-retest or novelty explanation less parsimonious. Second, the study drew on a single intact class at one school, which constrains statistical generalizability; transferability to other EFL contexts should be judged against the contextual detail provided rather than assumed. Third, some qualitative data (student interviews, journal entries) relied on self-report, which may be subject to social-desirability bias despite member checking. Future research should employ a quasi-experimental or randomized controlled design with an active comparison group, multiple sites, and longer-term follow-up to assess durability of gains.

Conclusions

This convergent parallel mixed-methods study provides supporting evidence that a six-week, peer-mediated Creative Partnership Model is associated with significant gains in EFL students' critical thinking and reading comprehension. Quantitatively, students showed a statistically significant overall improvement in reading comprehension, $t(31) = 10.21$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size ($d = 1.81$) and gains ranging from 19.3% (literal) to 36.4% (evaluative). Qualitatively, classroom discourse shifted from monologic to dialogic interaction, students demonstrated emerging critical and reflective thinking, collaborative creativity increased engagement and learner autonomy, and the teacher repositioned from authority figure to co-learner. The convergence of these two strands indicates that the model operates as a multidimensional cognitive, social, and affective learning scaffold. Because the design involved a single group at a single site without a comparison condition, these findings should be read as promising, theoretically coherent evidence rather than definitive proof of causal effectiveness; rival explanations such as maturation and test familiarity cannot be fully excluded, even though the qualitative data and the theoretically predictable gradient of gains make them less likely as sole explanations. With this caveat, the Creative Partnership Model represents a viable, empirically grounded pedagogical option for teachers seeking to develop reading comprehension and critical thinking in EFL classrooms. Future research should test the model using quasi-experimental or randomized designs with comparison groups across multiple schools, examine longer-term retention of gains, and investigate how the model performs across different proficiency levels and educational settings.

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