

English FAL Teachers' Perceptions of Subject Specialists' Role in Vhembe East

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Abstract

This study explored English First Additional Language (FAL) teachers' perceptions of subject specialists in Vhembe East District, Limpopo Province, focusing on their role in enhancing instructional quality. Using sociocultural learning theory, a mixed-method approach was employed with questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving 50 primary and secondary teachers. Quantitative findings revealed that while many teachers recognised the specialists' supportive role and relevant advice, a significant number remained neutral or sceptical due to limited impactful experiences. The qualitative analysis highlighted teachers' appreciation for professional development but stressed the need for frequent, meaningful interactions and context-specific support. The study concludes that subject specialists should prioritise high-quality, tailored professional development, engage regularly with teachers, and address their unique challenges. These insights offer practical guidance for stakeholders to implement strategies that improve instructional quality across the district.

Keywords: English FAL; subject specialist; subject-specific support; teacher perceptions



INTRODUCTION



The Vhembe East District, located in the northern part of South Africa's Limpopo Province, is predominantly rural and faces numerous educational challenges common to rural districts. According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2018), infrastructural inadequacies, teacher shortages, and socioeconomic disparities negatively impact the quality of education. Schools often contend with overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, limited access to clean water and electricity, and a scarcity of learning resources (DBE, 2018). Attracting and retaining qualified teachers remains a persistent issue due to remote locations and unfavourable living conditions (Mulkeen, 2007), resulting in under-resourced and understaffed learning environments (DBE, 2019). The district follows South Africa's National Curriculum Statements (NCS) for Grades R–12, aimed at fostering learners' social and economic development. However, implementing this curriculum in Vhembe East is hindered by the



district's systemic challenges (DBE, 2018). Student performance remains inconsistent; while some learners excel nationally (Amnesty International, 2020), high dropout rates and low matric pass rates persist, especially in Mathematics and Science (DBE, 2019).

Despite these challenges, little is known about English First Additional Language (FAL) teachers' perceptions of subject specialists in the district. The closest related study focused on the "impact of language subject advisors' support in teaching and learning languages in the Intermediate Phase" (Munyai, Litshani, & Mulovhedzi, 2021:17579). Given the potential of subject specialists to enhance educational quality, understanding teachers' perceptions is crucial for informing strategies to address the district's educational challenges.

In its pursuit of this spelt out research quest, the study will try to answer the following research questions:

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- What are the English FAL teachers' perceptions in the Vhembe East District towards the role of subject specialists in the educational system?
- What factors influence these perceptions among English FAL teachers in the Vhembe East District?
- How can the interaction and collaboration between English FAL teachers and subject specialists be improved in the Vhembe East District to enhance educational outcomes?

Problem statement

Subject specialists are crucial in curriculum development, teacher support, and educational improvement. However, in Vhembe East District, communication gaps, inconsistent roles, and varying expectations hinder their effectiveness, necessitating comprehensive research to address these challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework

Sociocultural learning theory emphasises the impact of social interactions and culture on learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Applying this to the research topic, English FAL teachers' perceptions of subject specialists in Vhembe East District could be significantly influenced by their social interactions with these specialists and the prevailing cultural norms in their educational community. The quality of collaborative learning experiences, the cultural compatibility of the professional development initiatives, and the relevance of the support provided in the local context could shape teachers' views. Understanding these sociocultural dynamics is key to enhancing the role of subject specialists in this district and tailoring their strategies to effectively meet the teachers' needs.

The role of subject specialists in education

Subject specialists, also known as curriculum advisors or subject matter experts, play a pivotal role in enhancing English First Additional Language (EFAL) instruction through curriculum development, teacher professional development, and policy guidance (Department of Basic Education, 2019). In curriculum development, they design lesson plans, activities, and assessments aligned with educational standards, integrating technological advancements and cultural diversity to ensure content remains relevant and responsive to societal changes

(Williams, 2021; Brown, 2020; Johnson & Lee, 2019; Taylor & Wilson, 2020).

Their role in teacher professional development is equally significant, offering training, guidance, and mentoring to help educators implement effective instructional strategies (Miller & Davis, 2019; Department of Education, 2019). They promote collaboration and sustained pedagogical growth through workshops, professional learning communities, and continuous feedback (Green & White, 2020). Additionally, subject specialists contribute to policy development and research, aligning EFAL strategies with best practices and evolving needs (Harris, 2020), and play key roles in Continuous Assessment (CASS) planning and national examinations, shaping assessment standards and tracking learner performance.

Teachers' perceptions of subject specialists

Teacher perceptions of subject specialists in English First Additional Language (EFAL) education are shaped by professional experiences, school contexts, and interactions with specialists (Anderson & Wilson, 2021). Many teachers value their expertise, particularly when it enhances instructional practices and content knowledge (Tshabalala & Mphahlele, 2024). Context-specific professional development that directly impacts classroom practices is especially appreciated (Smith & Cooper, 2020; Patel & Adams, 2021).

Perceptions vary across cultural contexts. In hierarchical systems like China, structured, top-down guidance is preferred, while U.S. teachers favour collaborative models (Li & Zhao, 2020; Johnson & Peters, 2021). In Europe, specialists are viewed positively when they respect teacher autonomy (European Commission, 2020), while in low-income or rural areas, practical solutions to resource-related challenges are highly valued (Mbatha & Smith, 2021; Joubert, Van Rooyen, & De Villiers, 2020). The nature of support is crucial—teachers value practical, skill-enhancing guidance (Green & White, 2020; Brown & Roberts, 2021), but view disconnected or unrealistic advice as intrusive (Miller & Thompson, 2020; Evans & Harris, 2020). Constructive dialogue and collaboration are essential for effective EFAL instruction (Wang & Lee, 2020; Spaul & Kotze, 2020).

Factors influencing teachers' perceptions of subject specialists

Teacher perceptions of subject specialists in English First Additional Language (EFAL) education vary based on professional experiences, school contexts, and interactions (Anderson & Wilson, 2021). Teachers value expertise that enhances instructional practices and content knowledge, especially when professional development is practical and context-specific (Tshabalala & Mphahlele, 2024; Smith & Cooper, 2020; Patel & Adams, 2021). Perceptions differ culturally: Chinese teachers prefer top-down guidance, while U.S. educators favour collaborative models (Li & Zhao, 2020; Johnson & Peters, 2021). In Europe, specialists are valued for respecting teacher autonomy (European Commission, 2020), and in rural or low-income areas, for offering practical support (Mbatha & Smith, 2021; Joubert, Van Rooyen, & De Villiers, 2020). The nature of support is crucial—practical, skill-enhancing guidance is appreciated (Green & White, 2020; Brown & Roberts, 2021), but disconnected or authoritarian advice is often rejected, especially in rural contexts (Miller & Thompson, 2020; Evans & Harris, 2020; Wang & Lee, 2020; Spaul & Kotze, 2020). Constructive dialogue and collaboration are key to fostering effective EFAL instruction.

Ways to improve interaction and collaboration between subject specialists and teachers

Enhancing collaboration between teachers and subject specialists is vital for improving English First Additional Language (EFAL) education. Professional development workshops bridge knowledge gaps and promote the integration of advanced content into teaching, fostering transformative student learning (Harris & Jones, 2020; Smith & Cooper, 2020). Regular formal and informal meetings align curricular goals and address challenges (Anderson & Wilson, 2021), while digital platforms like Microsoft Teams and Google Workspace facilitate continuous, flexible communication (Brown & Roberts, 2021). Combining traditional and modern strategies, grounded in mutual respect, strengthens collaboration, ultimately enhancing instructional quality and student outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design: This study employed a mixed methods design in which the questionnaire and

semi-structured interviews regarding English FAL teachers' perceptions of the role of subject specialists were investigated.

Population: The study population comprised primary and secondary English FAL teachers in the Vhembe East district.

Sample and sampling techniques: Fifty (50) primary and secondary English FAL teachers were the sample for the study. These teachers were selected from schools randomly sampled from the Vhembe East District.

Data collection: Data were collected through quantitative and qualitative methods using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, respectively. The questionnaires were distributed first to the 50 sampled English FAL teachers, after which 10% of the study population was engaged through semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis: The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 29 with the assistance of statisticians. The data were converted into tables for better interpretation. On the other hand, the researcher manually analysed the qualitative data thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section analyses English FAL teachers' perceptions in Vhembe East District using quantitative and qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews. It examines subject specialists' roles in supporting teachers, enhancing teaching efficacy, and improving student outcomes, identifying key themes, challenges, and strategies to optimise collaboration and educational practices.

Gender distribution: The gender distribution of English FAL teachers in the Vhembe East District is imbalanced, with more females (35) than males (15), reflecting broader trends in language education. This disparity may influence teaching styles, classroom dynamics, and engagement with subject specialists, necessitating tailored professional development to support both genders effectively.

Age distribution: The age distribution of EFAL teachers in Vhembe East District is predominantly mid-career, with 43.1% aged 41-50 and 27.5% aged 51-60, reflecting extensive experience. Younger teachers (21-30, 9.8%) are underrepresented, indicating recruitment challenges. Tailored professional development

can enhance pedagogical growth and address diverse instructional needs.

Table1: Analyses of quantitative data

Category	Subcategory	Count	Percentage (%)
Gender Distribution	Female	35	70.0
	Male	15	30.0
Age Distribution	21-30	7	9.8
	31-40	10	13.7
	41-50	20	43.1
	51-60	20	27.5
	61-65	5	5.9
Highest Academic Qualifications	Bachelor's	25	50.0
	Honours	15	30.0
	Master's	5	10.0
	PhD	2	4.0
Highest Professional Qualifications	STD	10	25.0
	PTD	8	20.0
	BAED	6	15.0
	UED/PGCE	12	30.0
Years of Teaching Experience	1-10 years	15	25.0
	11-20 years	18	30.0
	21-30 years	10	20.0
	31-40 years	6	10.0

Highest academic qualifications: The academic qualifications of English FAL teachers in Vhembe East District vary, with most holding a bachelor's degree (25) and 15 possessing an Honours degree, while few have a master's or PhD. This highlights the need for further academic development. Subject specialists can bridge this gap through targeted training, mentorship, and promoting advanced studies.

Highest professional qualifications: English FAL teachers in Vhembe East District hold varied qualifications, from Senior Teaching Diploma (STD) and Primary Teacher's Diploma (PTD) to BAED and Postgraduate Certificate in Education

(UED/PGCE). Subject specialists enhance instructional quality by providing tailored professional development, mentorship, and resources, supporting less-qualified teachers and strengthening EFAL education.

Years of teaching experience: English FAL teachers in Vhembe East District have varied experience, predominantly 1–10 or 11–20 years, with fewer having 21–40 years. Novice teachers need mentorship in classroom management, while experienced educators require updates on modern methodologies. Subject specialists provide tailored support, enhancing teaching quality and fostering improved learning outcomes.

PERCEPTIONS OF SUBJECT SPECIALISTS

English FAL teachers in Vhembe East District hold varied perceptions of subject specialists, highlighting their supportiveness, influence on teaching techniques, relevance of advice, and approachability in addressing challenges. These insights offer a deeper understanding of subject specialists' impact on teaching practices.

Supportiveness of teaching practice: The perception of subject specialists as supportive aligns with Vygotsky's SCT (1978), with 26 teachers viewing their support positively, 17 remaining neutral, and 8 disagreeing. While many recognise their role in providing guidance, resources, and confidence-building (Patel & Adams, 2021; Smith & Cooper, 2020; DBE, 2019), neutrality suggests dissatisfaction or limited impact (Evans & Harris, 2020). This highlights the need for improved engagement and tailored support to strengthen collaboration, enhance professional development, and boost teachers' confidence in subject specialists.

Table 2: Perceptions of subject specialists

Categories	Agree / Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
Supportiveness of teaching practice	26 (51%)	17 (33%)	8 (16%)
Influence on teaching techniques	30 (59%)	11 (22%)	9 (18%)
Relevance of advice	34 (67%)	14 (27%)	3 (6%)
Comfort in discussing challenges	34 (67%)	11 (22%)	6 (12%)

Influence on teaching techniques: Subject specialists play a crucial role in mentoring teachers and driving educational improvement (Miller & Davis, 2019; Brown, 2020; Williams, 2021). Data shows 30 teachers acknowledge their

positive impact on teaching methods, while 11 remain neutral and 9 disagree. Although most value their contributions, the neutrality and dissent of 20 teachers highlight concerns about their effectiveness in enhancing English FAL

instruction. Nevertheless, subject specialists remain essential in introducing innovative strategies, fostering dynamic teaching, and upholding high educational standards.

Relevance of advice: The relevance of subject specialists' advice is crucial in assessing their effectiveness (Smith & Cooper, 2020; Anderson & Wilson, 2021; Patel & Adams, 2021). Data shows that 34 out of 51 teachers find the advice relevant, while 17 remain uncertain or dissatisfied, with 14 expressing neutrality. Although specialists generally succeed in tailoring guidance to teachers' needs, the mixed feedback suggests concerns about the quality and applicability of their support. This highlights the need for continuous refinement to ensure practical and context-specific advice. Ongoing dialogue and

feedback are essential for enhancing subject specialists' effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges English FAL teachers face.

Comfort in discussing challenges: Teachers' comfort in discussing challenges with subject specialists is vital for effective collaboration (Johnson & Peters, 2021; Mbatha & Smith, 2021). While 34 teachers feel comfortable, 11 remain neutral and 6 disagree, indicating barriers like perceived judgment, time constraints, or lack of trust. The absence of memorable experiences suggests disengagement or limited impact. This neutrality highlights broader ambivalence towards subject specialists, emphasising the need for stronger engagement, trust-building, and a supportive environment to foster open communication and enhance collaboration.

Table 3: Factors influencing perceptions of subject specialists

Categories	Not Important / Somewhat Important	Neutral	Important / Very Important
Quality of Professional Development	3(6.8%)	15(34.1%)	33(75%)
Frequency of Interaction	4(9.1%)	23(52.3%)	24(54.5%)
Relevance of Advice	5(11.4%)	5(11.4%)	36(81.8%)

Quality of professional development: The quality of professional development provided by subject specialists significantly influences teachers' perceptions (Green & White, 2020). Data shows that 22 teachers rated it as important, 11 as very important, while only 3 considered it less significant, with 15 remaining neutral. Teachers value well-structured, effective training that enhances skills, confidence, and teaching practices (Brown & Roberts, 2021; Miller & Thompson, 2020). Subject specialists must deliver relevant, impactful sessions, as their effectiveness directly shapes teacher trust and professional growth.

Frequency of interaction: The frequency of interaction with subject specialists received mixed responses: 17 teachers rated it as important, 7 as very important, while 23 remained neutral, and 4 found it somewhat important. While regular engagement fosters stronger relationships and ongoing support (Green & White, 2020), the neutrality suggests quality may outweigh frequency. Effective interactions should address teachers' needs without overwhelming them. Subject specialists should adopt a balanced approach, ensuring meaningful, consistent engagement that enhances communication,

supports professional growth, and effectively addresses challenges in English FAL teaching.

Relevance of advice: The relevance of subject specialists' advice is highly valued, with 25 teachers rating it as important and 11 as very important, while only 5 considered it less significant or neutral. This highlights the need for context-specific guidance that addresses classroom challenges effectively (Green & White, 2020). Relevant advice enhances teaching effectiveness, reinforcing the subject specialist's role. To maximise impact, specialists must understand teachers' individual contexts and tailor their support accordingly, ensuring their guidance is both practical and applicable to the unique dynamics of each English FAL classroom.

Understanding of specific challenges and needs: Understanding teachers' specific challenges is crucial for subject specialists, with 22 teachers rating it as important and 14 as very important, while only 3 viewed it as less important or neutral. Teachers value empathetic specialists who offer targeted, practical support, fostering trust and credibility (Brown & Roberts, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020). Building strong relationships, actively listening, and understanding teachers' realities enable

specialists to provide effective, relevant guidance, ultimately enhancing collaboration and improving instructional practices.

ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

This qualitative analysis investigates English FAL teachers' perceptions of subject specialists in Vhembe East District, focusing on their role in enhancing teaching practices, addressing curriculum challenges, and improving student outcomes. It highlights strengths, limitations, and areas for improving specialist-teacher engagement and support.

English FAL teachers' experiences in their roles as educators working with subject specialists:

Teachers in the Vhembe East District reported mixed experiences with subject specialists, recognising their essential role while identifying areas for improvement. Subject specialists are seen as "the backbone that keeps us connected to the latest teaching methodologies and curriculum updates" (Tshabalala & Mphahlele, 2024), providing pedagogical guidance and psychological support, particularly in grammar instruction and student engagement. However, infrequent visits and limited interaction remain concerns. Interviewee 1 noted, "We have subject specialists assigned to our district, but visits are infrequent, maybe once a term if we're lucky." Teachers highlighted the need for consistent, practical classroom support, criticising current engagements for focusing more on administrative tasks than hands-on assistance.

Positive experiences were reported when subject specialists maintained regular contact, including via digital platforms. Teacher 3 shared, "We have a particularly dedicated subject specialist who makes an effort to visit more often and is always available via WhatsApp for guidance in many areas" (Miller & Davis, 2019). However, the absence of sustained follow-up remains problematic. Teacher 2 observed, "The specialist demonstrated some engaging interactions through technology, but we never received follow-up or support to implement them properly." Teachers stressed the importance of specialists understanding localised challenges, particularly in under-resourced schools (Evans & Harris, 2020), and advocated for more classroom observations and personalised feedback.

Teachers' views about the role of subject specialists in supporting teaching and learning in their school:

Teachers in the Vhembe East District hold varied perspectives on subject specialists' roles in supporting teaching and learning, recognising their expertise while identifying areas for improvement. Many teachers appreciate their knowledge but criticise the impracticality of some recommendations. Interviewee 2 stated, "There's no doubt that they are knowledgeable, but sometimes their suggestions feel disconnected from our everyday realities," particularly in overcrowded, resource-limited classrooms (Miller & Thompson, 2020). Teachers advocate for context-sensitive support and personalised interventions, with Interviewee 2 adding, "We need specialists who understand our unique context and work with us to find solutions that fit our specific needs."

While subject specialists could enhance technology integration through targeted professional development, teachers highlight a lack of dialogue and feedback (Wang & Lee, 2020). Teacher 2 remarked, "It often feels like a one-way street. The specialist comes, delivers information, and leaves." Teachers recommend more frequent visits, classroom observations, and practical workshops. Teacher 5 stressed, "It's one thing to talk about teaching strategies in theory, but it's another to see them in action and provide context-specific feedback." Specialists are also viewed as potential mentors, fostering collaboration and guiding curriculum implementation.

Teachers' perceptions of the significant influence of subject specialists' work on their teaching practices:

Teachers in the Vhembe East District generally recognise the positive impact of subject specialists on their teaching practices, though the extent of this influence varies. Interviewee 3 praised their role, stating, "I always look forward to their workshops," highlighting the benefits of new strategies, particularly in integrating technology into the EFAL curriculum, which has improved student engagement. He advocated for "continuous mentorship rather than sporadic interventions" to maximise these benefits (Harris & Jones, 2020). Similarly, Interviewee 1 noted, "The support I've received from subject specialists has helped me to become a more confident and effective teacher."

Subject specialists are also valued for their constructive feedback, enabling teachers to refine their methods. Interviewee 2 shared, “I’ve been able to implement new teaching strategies and approaches based on the advice of subject specialists” (Smith & Cooper, 2020). However, not all teachers experienced significant changes. Interviewee 4 remarked, “While the support I’ve received has been helpful, I don’t think it has significantly impacted my teaching practices.” Despite varying experiences, consensus remains on the essential role of subject specialists in enhancing teaching and learning. As Interviewee 5 concluded, “Their work is essential for improving teaching and learning in our school.”

The strengths and weaknesses of the school’s current engagement with subject specialists:

Teachers in the Vhembe East District identified both strengths and weaknesses in their schools’ engagement with subject specialists (Vygotsky, 1978; Smith & Cooper, 2020; Tylor & Wilson, 2020; Patel & Adams, 2021). A key strength is their accessibility and expertise. Interviewee 1 noted, “They are always available to provide support when needed,” while Interviewee 3 highlighted their “knowledge of the curriculum and teaching methods.” Interviewee 5 further emphasised their role in fostering collaboration, stating they “enhance community and the sharing of best practices” among teachers.

However, concerns persist regarding inconsistency and overly prescriptive guidance. Interviewee 2 remarked, “The support provided by subject specialists can be inconsistent,” limiting its effectiveness. Similarly, Interviewee 4 criticised their advice as “sometimes too prescriptive,” reducing its classroom applicability (Wang & Lee, 2020). Interviewee 5 also noted that subject specialists are often “spread too thin,” due to high demand, which compromises personalised support. Improved resource allocation and scheduling could enhance their impact.

Ways the role of subject specialists could be improved to better support the work of English FAL teachers in the Vhembe East District: Teachers in the Vhembe East District proposed strategies to enhance subject specialists’ support, emphasising increased collaboration and context-specific guidance. Interviewee 4 suggested specialists “should work alongside us

in the classroom more often” to provide grounded advice (Li & Zhao, 2020), while Teacher 5 advocated for “more frequent school visits and classroom observations” to offer relevant feedback. Teachers also called for collaborative professional development (Spaull & Kotze, 2020), with Teacher 1 recommending peer-learning workshops and Interviewee 2 emphasising “tailored professional development opportunities” addressing specific classroom needs. Teacher 2 highlighted the need for training in “concrete strategies, resources, and technological skills” for 21st-century instruction. Additionally, Interviewee 5 proposed involving specialists in school improvement planning to strengthen educational outcomes (Harris, 2020). These recommendations underscore the need for deeper engagement, sustained mentorship, and collaborative learning to optimise subject specialists’ impact.

CONCLUSION

The study provides a nuanced understanding of English FAL teachers’ perceptions of subject specialists in Vhembe East District, Limpopo Province. While teachers generally view subject specialists as supportive and influential in enhancing teaching techniques, some remain neutral or sceptical, citing a lack of memorable experiences, which suggests limited impact. This highlights the need for more tailored, impactful support. Perceptions are shaped by the quality, relevance, and frequency of professional development, with teachers valuing context-sensitive guidance that addresses specific challenges. The study recommends high-quality, context-specific professional development, consistent engagement, and trust-building to improve collaboration. These strategies aim to foster a supportive environment, enhance instructional quality, and improve educational outcomes, offering a foundation for strategic interventions to optimise subject specialists’ roles in teaching and learning.

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