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Exploring Feedback Practices of Non-Specialist Primary EFL Teachers Through Perceived Subject Matter Knowledge

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Abstract

English language teaching in Indonesian primary schools has continued to develop; however, its implementation still faces significant challenges because English is often taught by non-specialist teachers without formal qualifications in English language education. This issue is important to investigate because feedback plays a crucial role in supporting students' language development and classroom participation during interaction. Previous studies have generally examined corrective feedback and Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) separately, resulting in limited understanding of how these two aspects are interconnected in actual classroom practice. Therefore, this study aims to explore the feedback practices implemented by non-specialist teachers in primary EFL classrooms and to examine how perceived Subject Matter Knowledge is reflected in those practices. This study employed an exploratory qualitative design conducted at a public primary school in Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews involving five non-specialist English teachers and were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers predominantly implemented direct corrective feedback, repetition, translation, and meaning-oriented feedback rather than elicitation or learner self-repair strategies. Teachers perceived limitations in grammar and pronunciation also contributed to the use of simpler, more cautious feedback practices and greater reliance on external resources. Based on these findings, the study recommends strengthening professional development programs related to pronunciation, grammar explanation, and interactional feedback strategies for non-specialist primary school teachers.
Keywords: feedback practices; non-specialist teachers; subject matter knowledge; primary EFL classroom; teacher cognition.

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Introduction

Feedback is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of language learning because it helps learners recognize gaps between their current and target language performance. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, feedback provides opportunities for learners to improve linguistic accuracy, develop communicative competence, and sustain engagement in classroom interaction (Nassaji, 2016; Walsh & Li, 2016). In the primary school sector, implementing oral feedback requires teachers to balance immediate linguistic correction with the emotional and interactional dynamics of young learners (Pinter, 2017). Its role becomes even more important in primary education, where young learners rely heavily on teachers as sources of linguistic input and guidance. In Indonesia, the shifting landscape of language policy at the elementary level has significantly increased the demand for English language instruction (Butler, 2022; Zein, 2017). However, English is frequently taught by non-specialist teachers who do not possess formal qualifications in English language education (Zein et al., 2020). This situation raises important questions regarding how these teachers provide feedback on students' language use and support language development in classroom interaction.

Previous studies have examined feedback practices from various perspectives. Research on corrective feedback has largely focused on identifying feedback types, investigating learner uptake, and examining the effectiveness of feedback strategies in promoting language development (Ellis & Shintani, 2013; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Nassaji, 2016). Theoretical frameworks often contrast structural correction with meaning-oriented approaches, noting that classroom realities dictate how strictly rules are enforced (Ellis, 2016). When handled by non-specialist educators, the delivery of corrective feedback often shifts from structural focus to simplified communication due to the complex interaction between individual teacher knowledge and the institutional setting (Pawlak, 2016). Other studies have explored teachers' Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) and its influence on classroom instruction, revealing that teachers' confidence and competence often vary across language domains such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Butler, 2022; Garton & Copland, 2019). Studies involving non-specialist teachers have further documented challenges related to linguistic competence, instructional confidence, and English language pedagogy (Zein et al., 2020). Despite these contributions, feedback practices and teacher knowledge have generally been examined as separate areas of inquiry, resulting in limited understanding of how teachers' perceptions of their language knowledge influence the feedback they provide during classroom interaction.

The limited integration of feedback research and teacher knowledge research represents an important gap in the literature. From a theoretical perspective, teacher cognition theory suggests that classroom practices are shaped not only by what teachers know but also by how they perceive their own competence and capabilities (Borg, 2015). This internal perception of competence, especially under the framework of sociocultural teacher development, directly guides how instructors process errors and construct real-time interactional scaffolding (Li, 2020). Methodologically, previous research has often relied on surveys and self-reported perceptions of teacher competence, providing limited insight into how such perceptions are enacted during actual classroom interaction. Contextually, evidence from Indonesian primary EFL settings remains scarce, particularly in schools where English instruction is delivered by non-specialist teachers. Addressing this gap is important because feedback represents a key pedagogical decision through which teachers' knowledge, confidence, and beliefs become visible in practice.

In response to these gaps, the present study explores feedback practices implemented by non-specialist teachers in primary EFL classrooms and examines how perceived Subject Matter Knowledge shapes those practices. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do non-specialist teachers implement feedback practices when responding to students' English use in primary EFL classrooms? and (2) How does perceived Subject Matter Knowledge shape non-specialist teachers' feedback practices? By integrating perspectives from corrective feedback research and teacher cognition theory, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of classroom feedback among non-specialist teachers and provides insights for teacher education and professional development in primary EFL contexts.

Research Methods

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate feedback practices implemented by non-specialist teachers and to examine how perceived Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) shaped those practices in primary EFL classrooms. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and instructional decision-making in naturally occurring classroom contexts rather than measuring predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was conducted at a public primary school in Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where English had recently been implemented as a compulsory subject.

The primary data consisted of classroom interaction data and teacher narratives collected from participants directly involved in English instruction, while relevant literature on corrective feedback, teacher cognition, and subject matter knowledge served as secondary sources to support data interpretation and discussion. Qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher to obtain a contextual and detailed understanding of how feedback practices were enacted and interpreted in authentic classroom interaction (Tracy, 2019). This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, meanings, and instructional decisions within naturally occurring classroom settings, providing rich and nuanced data for analysis.

The population comprised non-specialist teachers responsible for teaching English at the primary level. Using purposive sampling, five teachers were selected based on three criteria: (1) teaching English in Grades 4–6, (2) not holding formal qualifications in English language education, and (3) active involvement in English teaching during data collection. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research focus (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2016).

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted over a two-month period. Classroom observation focused on naturally occurring feedback episodes, including corrective strategies, timing of feedback, and interactional patterns (Mackey & Gass, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' perceptions of their subject matter knowledge and the reasoning behind their feedback decisions, allowing flexibility while maintaining focus on key themes (Kallio et al., 2016).

Data collection procedures were conducted in several stages. First, the researcher identified and selected participants based on the predetermined criteria. Second, classroom observations were carried out to document naturally occurring feedback practices during English instruction. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of Subject Matter Knowledge and the considerations

underlying their feedback decisions. All observation notes and interview recordings were subsequently organized and prepared for thematic analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis began with data familiarization through repeated reading of observation notes and interview transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the data. The researcher then generated initial codes related to feedback practices and perceived Subject Matter Knowledge. Similar codes were subsequently categorized into broader themes and reviewed across data sources to ensure consistency and relevance to the research questions. Subsequently, the themes were refined, defined, and named to ensure conceptual clarity and coherence with the research questions. Finally, the themes were interpreted and synthesized to explain how non-specialist teachers implemented feedback practices and how perceived Subject Matter Knowledge shaped those practices. This approach was suitable for identifying patterns in teacher feedback practices and cognition-related factors (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was conducted by comparing classroom observation data and interview responses, ensuring consistency across data sources (Carter et al., 2014; Flick, 2018). This process strengthened credibility and supported a more comprehensive interpretation of findings.

Results and Discussion

Result

Feedback Practices Implemented by Non-Specialist Teachers

The findings revealed that non-specialist teachers predominantly implemented direct corrective feedback and meaning-oriented responses when addressing students' English use in primary EFL classrooms. Classroom observation data showed that teachers frequently corrected students' pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence errors by immediately providing the correct forms rather than encouraging learners to independently identify or repair errors. In several classroom interactions, correction was followed by repetition and language modeling activities to reinforce students' understanding of the target expressions. Teachers also relied heavily on translation and simplified explanations to maintain students' comprehension and classroom participation. Interactive feedback strategies such as elicitation, clarification requests, and learner self-repair opportunities appeared less frequently because teachers preferred immediate and practical responses during instructional interaction. These findings indicate that feedback implementation among non-specialist teachers was primarily teacher-centered and focused on supporting students' understanding rather than promoting deeper form-focused interaction.

Table 1. Feedback Practices Implemented by Non-Specialist Teachers

Theme	Key Findings	Representative Evidence
Direct Corrective Feedback	Teachers immediately corrected inaccurate vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence forms.	"Not seven clock, but seven o'clock." (Observation-T4B)

Language Modeling and Repetition	Corrected forms were commonly followed by repetition activities.	Teacher asked students to repeat: "I go to school at seven o'clock." (Observation-T4A)
Meaning-Oriented Feedback	Teachers prioritized vocabulary understanding and meaning clarification.	"Saya biasanya terjemahkan dulu supaya mereka paham." ("I usually translate first so they understand.") (Interview-T6B)
Limited Interactive Feedback	Elicitation and learner self-repair strategies appeared infrequently.	"Yang penting anak-anak paham dulu yang sederhana." ("The important thing is that children understand the simple things first.") (Interview-T5A)

The findings further suggest that the implementation of these feedback practices was influenced by classroom conditions and teachers' instructional priorities. Teachers appeared to prioritize maintaining students' confidence, participation, and comprehension during English learning activities rather than emphasizing detailed grammatical correction. Since English was taught to young learners at the primary level, teachers believed that excessive correction might discourage students from participating actively in classroom interaction. Consequently, feedback practices were simplified and directed toward maintaining supportive learning environments where students could engage in English learning without fear of making mistakes.

Perceived Subject Matter Knowledge in Feedback Practices

Interview and classroom observation data further revealed that teachers perceived Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) strongly shaped the way feedback was delivered during classroom interaction. Teachers who perceived themselves as having limited confidence in grammar and pronunciation tended to provide cautious and simplified feedback responses. In several situations, teachers delayed correction, avoided detailed grammatical explanation, or relied on external resources such as Google Translate before responding to students' questions. In contrast, vocabulary-related feedback was delivered more confidently because teachers considered vocabulary easier and more familiar than sentence construction or pronunciation explanation. These findings demonstrate that teachers' perceptions of their linguistic competence influenced not only the type of feedback provided but also the timing, depth, and interactional focus of classroom correction.

Table 2. Perceived Subject Matter Knowledge in Feedback Practices

Theme	Key Findings	Representative Evidence
Cautious Feedback Under Limited SMK	Teachers delayed correction or checked references when uncertain about linguistic accuracy.	"Kalau saya tidak yakin, biasanya tidak langsung dikoreksi. Saya cek dulu..." ("If I'm not sure, I usually don't correct it right away. I'll check first...") (Interview-T6B)
Reliance on External Resources	Teachers frequently consulted Google or	"Saya cari dulu di Google... jadi tidak langsung dijawab di kelas kalau saya belum yakin." ("I'll Google it first… so

	other references before responding.	I don't answer it straight away in class if I'm not sure.") (Interview-T6B)
Meaning-Oriented Feedback	Teachers prioritized meaning and vocabulary understanding over grammatical explanation.	"Yang penting mereka suka dulu belajar Bahasa Inggris dan tau artinya." ("The important thing is that they like learning English and know its meaning.") (Interview-T5B)
Limited Form-Focused Explanation	Grammar and sentence structure received less detailed attention.	"Kalau kosakata mungkin masih bisa, tapi kalau kalimat, kadang saya tidak tahu..." ("If it's vocabulary, maybe I can still do it, but if it's sentences, sometimes I don't know...") (Interview-T5B)

The findings imply that perceived Subject Matter Knowledge became an important factor shaping teachers' instructional confidence and feedback responsiveness in primary EFL classrooms. While meaning-oriented feedback practices helped maintain learner participation and reduced students' anxiety during English learning activities, the limited use of interactive feedback and learner self-repair opportunities may reduce students' exposure to deeper grammatical awareness and independent language development. At the institutional level, the findings highlight the importance of providing professional support related to pronunciation, grammar explanation, and interactional feedback strategies for non-specialist teachers teaching English at the primary school level.

Discussion

Feedback Practices Implemented by Non-Specialist Teachers

The findings revealed that non-specialist teachers in primary EFL classrooms predominantly implemented direct corrective feedback, repetition, translation, and meaning-oriented interaction when responding to students' English use. Feedback was commonly delivered through immediate correction and language modeling rather than through elicitation or learner self-repair strategies. Teachers also relied heavily on simplified explanations and translation to maintain students' comprehension and classroom participation during English learning activities. These findings indicate that feedback implementation was largely teacher-centered and focused on helping young learners understand vocabulary meanings and simple sentence forms rather than encouraging extensive grammatical negotiation or interactional exploration. Such practices are closely associated with meaning-oriented instruction in young learner classrooms where maintaining communication and participation is often prioritized over explicit form-focused correction (Ellis, 2016; Mourão, 2016; Nassaji, 2016).

These findings may reflect the instructional realities faced by non-specialist teachers in primary EFL contexts where English is taught by general classroom teachers without formal English language teaching qualifications. Teachers appeared to prioritize maintaining students' confidence, motivation, and participation because young learners were considered more responsive to supportive and low-anxiety classroom environments. Consequently, feedback practices became more practical, immediate, and comprehension-oriented because teachers attempted to create positive classroom

interaction while minimizing students' fear of making mistakes. In this context, direct correction and translation functioned as accessible instructional strategies that helped teachers manage classroom interaction efficiently while supporting learners' understanding. Similar conditions have been reported in global primary English education contexts where teachers adapt instructional interaction to students' emotional readiness and limited linguistic exposure (Copland et al., 2014; Enever, 2020; Zein & Garton, 2019).

From the perspective of classroom interaction and teacher cognition, the findings suggest that feedback practices were not merely technical correction strategies but also pedagogical responses shaped by teachers' instructional priorities and perceptions of learners' needs. Walsh & Li (2016) explain that classroom feedback emerges dynamically through teachers' moment-by-moment interactional decisions during communication with learners. In this study, teachers tended to position feedback as a supportive instructional tool rather than as an explicit form-focused corrective mechanism. As a result, classroom interaction became more meaning-oriented and teacher-directed because maintaining learner participation and comprehension appeared more important than encouraging grammatical accuracy or learner self-repair during classroom communication. This finding aligns with interaction-based perspectives in second language acquisition emphasizing that instructional interaction is shaped by contextual classroom goals and communicative needs rather than solely by linguistic correction (Gass et al., 2025; Loewen & Sato, 2018).

The findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that primary EFL teachers frequently prioritize communicative understanding and supportive classroom interaction over explicit grammatical correction (Zein & Garton, 2019). Similarly, Copland et al. (2014) found that teachers working in primary EFL contexts often simplify instructional interaction to accommodate young learners' emotional and cognitive characteristics. Research on corrective feedback also suggests that teachers frequently adjust feedback strategies according to learners' age, proficiency, and classroom participation needs (Ellis, 2017; Lyster et al., 2013; Nassaji, 2016). However, this study contributes additional insights by specifically demonstrating how feedback implementation among non-specialist teachers becomes operationally visible through direct correction, translation, and repetition practices during authentic classroom interaction. Therefore, the findings extend existing discussions on primary EFL pedagogy by highlighting the interactional characteristics of feedback practices implemented by non-specialist teachers.

Perceived Subject Matter Knowledge in Feedback Practices

The findings further revealed that teachers perceived Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) shaped the ways feedback was delivered during classroom interaction. Teachers who perceived themselves as less confident in grammar and pronunciation tended to provide cautious and simplified feedback responses, delay correction, or rely on external resources such as Google Translate before responding to students' questions. In contrast, vocabulary-related feedback was delivered more confidently because teachers considered vocabulary easier and more familiar than sentence construction or pronunciation explanation. These findings demonstrate that teachers' perceptions of their linguistic competence became closely associated with the timing, depth, and interactional focus of classroom feedback practices. Similar tendencies have been identified in teacher cognition research showing that perceived linguistic knowledge strongly influences teachers' confidence and responsiveness during classroom interaction (Andrews, 2008; Borg, 2015).

These findings may reflect broader structural and professional conditions experienced by non-specialist teachers in primary schools. Since English is not always taught by teachers with formal English education backgrounds, many participants appeared to develop adaptive instructional strategies to manage linguistic uncertainty during classroom interaction. Teachers therefore employed safer instructional responses such as direct correction, translation, and external resource consultation to maintain instructional continuity and avoid providing inaccurate explanations. The findings also suggest that teachers attempted to balance their perceived linguistic limitations with their responsibility to maintain supportive and meaningful classroom interaction for young learners. In this context, cautious feedback practices became part of teachers' efforts to sustain participation and comprehension despite perceived limitations in grammatical or pronunciation knowledge. Such adaptive instructional behavior reflects broader issues of teacher preparedness and professional support commonly experienced by non-specialist English teachers in primary education contexts (Enever, 2020; Kubanyiova, 2012).

From the perspective of teacher cognition, the findings indicate that perceived Subject Matter Knowledge played an important role in shaping teachers' instructional responsiveness and interactional confidence. Borg (2015) argues that teachers' classroom decisions are closely connected to their beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge about teaching and language use. Similarly, Andrews (2008) explains that teachers' language awareness strongly influences how instructional interaction and corrective feedback are implemented in language classrooms. In the present study, teachers who perceived themselves as less confident in grammar and pronunciation tended to avoid extensive grammatical explanations and instead employed more comprehension-oriented feedback strategies. Consequently, feedback practices appeared more cautious and teacher-directed, as teachers attempted to maintain communicative interaction while minimizing potential linguistic inaccuracies during classroom instruction. This finding further supports the view that teacher cognition and perceived competence significantly shape interactional choices and pedagogical decision-making during classroom communication (Farrell, 2019; Kubanyiova, 2012).

The findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that non-specialist EFL teachers generally demonstrate greater confidence in teaching vocabulary than in explaining grammar or correcting pronunciation (Hermagustiana et al., 2017; Kuswandono, 2017). This aligns with teacher cognition research suggesting that perceived subject matter knowledge influences instructional decision-making, particularly in pronunciation instruction (Kochem, 2022). Studies have shown that teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and prior training experiences shape their confidence and classroom practices in pronunciation teaching, especially in balancing controlled and communicative activities (Burri & Baker, 2021). In addition, pronunciation development research indicates that pronunciation instruction requires sustained pedagogical awareness and interactional sensitivity because pronunciation learning is strongly influenced by learners' exposure, feedback, and classroom interaction opportunities (Saito et al., 2019). However, the present study contributes additional insights by specifically examining how perceived subject matter knowledge is operationally reflected in teachers' feedback responsiveness during classroom interaction. While previous studies have mainly focused on teacher preparedness and instructional knowledge, this study highlights the interactional relationship between perceived linguistic competence and feedback practices within authentic primary EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that feedback practices among non-specialist teachers should not simply be viewed as indicators of instructional weakness, but rather as context-sensitive pedagogical adaptations developed within limited professional and linguistic conditions. Loewen & Sato (2019) explain that instructed second language acquisition involves complex interaction between pedagogy, learner engagement, and classroom communication. In primary EFL classrooms, teachers often need to simultaneously manage students' emotional engagement, comprehension, participation, and language exposure. Consequently, feedback practices may become simplified and highly supportive because teachers attempt to balance instructional goals with practical classroom realities. Reflective teaching perspectives also emphasize that teachers continuously construct and reconstruct their instructional practices through experience-based reflection and contextual adaptation (Farrell, 2019; Farrell & Farrell, 2024).

Based on these findings, several recommendations may be proposed for English instruction in primary schools where English is taught by non-specialist teachers. Professional development programs should provide practical and contextual support related to pronunciation, grammar explanation, and interactional feedback strategies instead of focusing solely on general teaching methodology. Schools should also facilitate collaborative learning environments through mentoring programs, peer discussion, and accessible linguistic support systems to strengthen teachers' confidence during classroom interaction. In addition, teacher education programs should introduce responsive and communicative feedback approaches that balance meaning comprehension with opportunities for learner self-repair and grammatical awareness. Future research is recommended to investigate students' responses toward meaning-oriented feedback practices, explore broader educational contexts, and examine how professional development may support non-specialist teachers' feedback responsiveness over time. These recommendations are important because sustainable teacher development requires reflective support systems, interaction-focused pedagogy, and contextualized professional learning opportunities that acknowledge the realities experienced by non-specialist teachers in primary EFL classrooms (Borg, 2015; Farrell, 2019; Farrell & Farrell, 2024).

Conclusion

This study revealed that non-specialist teachers in primary EFL classrooms predominantly implemented direct corrective feedback, repetition, translation, and meaning-oriented interaction when responding to students' English use. Feedback practices were generally delivered through immediate correction and language modeling rather than through elicitation or learner self-repair strategies. The findings further demonstrated that teachers perceived Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) shaped the way feedback was delivered during classroom interaction. Teachers who perceived themselves as having limited confidence in grammar and pronunciation tended to provide cautious and simplified feedback responses, delay correction, avoid extensive grammatical explanation, and rely on external resources such as Google Translate during meaning clarification activities. Consequently, feedback practices became more teacher-directed and comprehension-oriented because teachers prioritized maintaining students' participation, confidence, and understanding during English learning activities. These findings indicate that perceived linguistic competence became closely associated with teachers' interactional responsiveness and instructional decision-making in primary EFL classrooms.

This study contributes conceptually, methodologically, and practically to discussions on corrective feedback and teacher cognition in primary EFL contexts. Conceptually, the study extends previous research by demonstrating how perceived Subject Matter Knowledge becomes operationally visible through classroom feedback practices and interactional responsiveness among non-specialist teachers. Methodologically, the study contributes by combining classroom observation and semi-structured interview data to examine feedback practices within authentic classroom interaction rather than relying solely on self-reported teacher perceptions. Practically, the findings provide insights for teacher education and professional development programs, particularly in contexts where English is taught by teachers without formal English language education backgrounds. The study highlights the importance of strengthening teachers' confidence in grammar, pronunciation, and interactional feedback strategies to support more balanced classroom practices that promote both meaning comprehension and opportunities for language development among young learners.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered in interpreting the findings. First, the study involved a limited number of participants from a single primary school context, which may restrict the broader transferability of the findings to other educational settings. Second, the study focused mainly on teachers' perspectives and classroom practices without examining students' responses toward the feedback provided during classroom interaction. Third, the study concentrated on naturally occurring classroom interaction and did not investigate the long-term influence of feedback practices on students' language development. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve broader educational contexts, include students' perspectives, and examine how professional development programs may support non-specialist teachers' feedback responsiveness and instructional confidence over time. Further studies may also explore the relationship between meaning-oriented feedback practices, learner participation, and grammatical awareness in primary EFL classrooms.

Author Contribution Statement

The authors' contributions to this article are as follows: Author 1 acted as the initiator of the study, formulated the research problem, conducted classroom observations and interviews, analyzed and interpreted the data, and prepared the initial manuscript draft. Author 2 contributed to the conceptual development of the study, supervised the research process, and provided critical feedback on the interpretation of findings and theoretical discussion. Author 3 contributed to validating the research data, reviewing the methodological procedures, and revising the manuscript critically for academic and linguistic quality. All authors approved the final version of the article and agreed to be responsible for all aspects of this research.

Statement of Interest

All authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest relevant to this research.

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