

*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
Vol. 21, No. 10, pp. 228-248, October 2022  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.10.12>  
Received Jun 30, 2022; Revised Sep 17, 2022; Accepted Oct 26, 2022

# Exploring Learners' Experiences of Receiving Formative Written Assessment Feedback in Business Studies as a Subject in South Africa

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study was to understand Grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative assessment in the South African school context. This exploratory qualitative study employed a case study design and was conducted with 12 Grade 10 learners from two public secondary schools, located in Johannesburg East, Gauteng. The study sample was purposefully and conveniently selected and data were collected through semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp voice calls. Thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data. Findings of the study generated two themes to describe the learners' experiences, namely timing, and specificity of formative feedback. The learners disclosed that they received delayed feedback that did not specify their individual progress, areas of work that was well done, and areas that needed improvement. This study suggests that if classroom teachers are to become effective 'mediators' of formative assessment, they must be provided with a better theoretical and practical grounding in the nature of formative assessment feedback. The Department of Education needs to provide more guidelines, practical demonstrations, and workshops to assist to teachers to understand and implement formative assessment feedback practices effectively. Teacher and student feedback literacy also has the potential to facilitate principled, research-informed feedback processes in the future.

**Keywords:** formative assessment; formative feedback; timing of feedback; specificity of feedback; Business Studies

## 1. Introduction

Assessment in South Africa during the apartheid era was not integrated into the teaching and learning process (Carless, 2012). The bulk of the assessments were summative, with the goal of grading how well students remembered the

knowledge given to them (Carless, 2012). In South Africa, the implementation of a new curriculum in 1997 based on the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) philosophy resulted in changes in assessment practices for teachers (DoE, 2017). The new curriculum placed emphasis on formative assessment to facilitate learner growth and development. (DoE, 2017). In 2009, the Ministerial Task Team (MTT) was formed to look into the implementation of the National Curriculum Statements (NCS) in Grades R-12. The Review Committee determined that the assessment standards were too ambiguous and limited in their ability to demonstrate progress (Nicol, 2019). Following the recommendations of the task team, the NCS was revised, and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) were created for each school subject (DoE, 2017). Formative assessment is supported by Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements because it involves learners, allowing them to share their assessment experiences and the reasons for those experiences, which can provide insights useful to the teaching and learning process (Nicol, 2019). According to the CAPS document for Business Studies, 'teacher-student interactions should involve discussion of goals, strategies, progress, and should develop peer and self-assessment skills that lead to learners becoming autonomous individuals' (DoE, 2017, p. 14). This indicates the shift from summative to formative assessment in the learning of Business Studies (Nicol, 2019). In this regard, feedback on formative assessment is considered part of classroom instruction, as well as one of the strongest educational tools that can be used to improve the academic performance of learners (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Particularly in the context of South African schools, where policy increasingly emphasises the importance of formative assessment (also referred to as assessment for learning), good quality formative feedback is a crucial source of reference that learners can use to identify a gap in their learning, and from which they can gain recommendations to close the gap (Moeed, 2015). Formative assessment feedback should indicate learner achievement effectively and efficiently and should be used to close gaps in the knowledge and skills of learners while improving teaching, according to the National Protocol for Assessment (NPA), which sets out the assessment process for Grades R-12 in South Africa and provides a policy framework for the management of school assessments. To improve the learning experience, feedback should be given following the assessment (DoE, 2017, p.3).

Timely, relevant, and detailed formative feedback is essential to the learning process and is crucial for helping learners to become self-regulating and independent lifelong learners (Carless, 2012). Feedback can help learners to prepare for future learning events by encouraging in-depth learning, developing thinking abilities, and encouraging in-depth learning (Carless & Boud, 2018).). While feedback is frequently viewed as the core component that improves teaching and learning, there appears to be a lack of concern for learners' experiences of formative feedback, particularly in the context of South African schools.

Scholars like Evans (2013), Tanner (2017), and Nicol (2021) have emphasised the need to analyse learners' understanding of feedback information. Literature about formative assessment feedback has revealed that understanding learners' experiences of assessment feedback is important as it helps one to provide feedback that encourages and helps learners to do better (Jones et al., 2016). The majority of studies on assessment feedback have been conducted outside of South Africa, with only a few allusions to the South African setting (Carless & Boud, 2018; Chidiebere, 2020; Nicol, 2020). Furthermore, such research focuses primarily on the experiences of tertiary students receiving formative feedback. Therefore, the lack of research on the phenomenon in the South African school context and in secondary school Business Studies, prompted this study. Specifically, it sought answer to the question: What are learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on Business Studies written formative assessments?

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

This study drew on the social constructivist theory. Social constructivism argues that an individual plays an active role in building and making sense of information (Cooper, 1999). It holds that, in a sociocultural context, individuals construct their reality through active participation and social interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, social constructivists emphasise that, with the assistance of a knowledgeable other (teacher), learners can begin to grasp concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own (Woo & Reeves, 2011). In this regard, giving learners formative feedback is viewed as a process in which the teacher helps learners to identify where they are in their learning as opposed to where they are supposed to be (Sardareha & Saad, 2012). The role of social interaction in the development of higher cognitive functions is central to the learning process for social constructivists. In the sense that providing feedback to learners is a form of social interaction (verbal and written) between the educator and the learners, this research is related to this theory. This feedback (social interaction) is an attempt to improve the learners' writing skills, so that they can progress to the next level (development of higher cognitive functions).

### **2.1. Meaning and Purpose of Formative Assessment**

Formative assessment (assessment *for* learning) is fundamentally a collaborative act that takes place between the teacher and learners (Hansen, 2020). Formative assessment can be defined as an educational tool that provides teachers and students with information that can be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning process. (Moeed, 2015; Hansen, 2020). The South African National Protocol for Assessment (NPA) encourages the use of formative assessment because this form of assessment promotes day-to-day classroom assessment complemented by formative feedback (DoE, 2017). As a result, formative assessment is an important part of classroom work that can help students to attain higher levels of accomplishment, especially when it is combined with good formative feedback (Nicol, 2019).

## 2.2 Formative Assessment During COVID-19

As schools around the world closed owing to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 and 2021, teachers had to shift their teaching and assessment to online to avoid the spread of the virus (Nicol, 2021). Formative assessment (FA) was used to support teachers to engage, guide and monitor students' (online) learning. Most South African schools had to employ various online formative assessments that were learning-oriented such as e-portfolios, reading responses, online discussion forums, multiple-choice questions (MCQs), peer and group presentations. Discussion forums and the online marking tool via the schools' learning management system were used to give students formative feedback (Chidiebere, 2020, p.65). However, the implementation of online formative assessment introduced great constraints within the South African context: the limited access to resources had made the synchronous online teaching of large classes difficult, necessitating the move towards blended approaches (Nicol, 2021). The opportunities to learn through active participation and socialisation were therefore limited, adding constraint to the implementation of online formative assessment feedback

## 2.3 Formative Assessment in Business Studies

Business Studies is one of 29 Further Education and Training (FET) disciplines and a commercial subject in the Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) category (Russell, 2013). Business Studies teaches important skills like leadership, risk-taking, problem-solving, and management, which prepare students for success in a variety of business settings. The assessment practice in Grade 10 Business Studies involves six formative assessments and two summative assessments (mid-year and final examination) over one school year. The six formative assessments consist of three Business Studies assignments/projects and three formative tests. Although this subject involves six official formative assessments, CAPS and NPA encourage Business Studies teachers to administer daily formative assessments to monitor teaching and learning (DoE, 2017). Formative assessment should always be followed by formative feedback, which informs learners about a gap between their current and desired academic performance as well as making recommendations on how they can improve their learning (Gipps & Stobart, 2011; DoE, 2017). Although formative assessment and formative feedback are widely applied as a means of instruction in business education today, little is known about learners' experiences of receiving formative feedback (Russell, 2013); hence the need for this study.

## 2.4 Definition and Purpose of Assessment Feedback

Feedback is an important component of the formative assessment process (Carless & Boud, 2018). In an educational context, feedback is described as the practice of giving learners responses on completed learning activities and informing them about what they need to do next to improve their learning (Heritage & Wylie, 2020). Different authors provide a similar conception of the term 'feedback' (Ngwenya & Maistry, 2012; Carless & Boud, 2018). For Nicol et al. (2016), feedback is also referred to as a form of communication to learners, which informs them about the gap between where they are in their learning and where they need to be.

In South Africa, formative written feedback is one of the fruitful modes of giving feedback to learners in secondary school (Van der Nest et al., 2018). It involves written comments only and it is often given to learners after they have completed an assessment (Moeed, 2015). Providing written feedback is one significant responsibility on the part of teachers. This is because, if teachers are to provide written feedback, they have to ensure that it facilitates academic improvement and motivation toward learning (Moeed, 2015). Learners also prefer written feedback over any other mode of giving feedback (Van der Kleij, 2019; Chidiebere, 2020; Faulconer et al., 2022).

## **2.5. Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Feedback**

### *2.5.1. The Timing of Assessment Feedback*

The timing of assessment feedback is a widely studied but underappreciated variable in the feedback process (Attali & van der Kleij, 2017). The literature offers a variety of suggestions for the best time to provide feedback (Swart et al., 2019). The point in the instructional sequence at which learners' errors are addressed is referred to as feedback timing (Quinn & Nakata, 2017, p. 59). Previous research on the issue of assessment feedback timing compared immediate feedback (provided during or immediately following the assessment task) to delayed feedback (provided days after the assessment task) (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol, 2019). In theory, one could argue both for providing feedback during the assessment task and for providing feedback afterwards. Assessment feedback is best provided during the assessment task because it allows learners to evaluate and adjust their knowledge while working on the task, allowing misunderstandings to be detected and corrected as soon as possible (Swart et al., 2019). From a cognitive standpoint, it could be argued that feedback should be provided following the assessment task in order to reduce learners' cognitive load (Attali & van der Kleij, 2017). According to this logic, it may be preferable to provide feedback after the assessment task rather than during the assessment task, so that learners' limited working memory capacity can be fully utilised to create a mental model of the learning task (Kluger & DeNisi, 2016; Swart et al., 2019).

Although assessment feedback may be immediate or slightly delayed, it must be provided when it is still useful to learners (Brookhart, 2017). Learners need to receive feedback while they are still mindful of the content knowledge, topic, or performance in question (Brookhart, 2017). Previous studies on the timing of feedback have shown that assessment feedback provided when it is still useful to the learners is more effective in enhancing learning than feedback provided when it is no longer useful (Swart et al., 2019). It may therefore be said that assessment feedback is most effective if it is received when learners are still mindful of and striving for the learning goal (Brookhart, 2017).

A substantial literature on formative assessment feedback practices reveals that, in most cases, learners receive delayed assessment feedback which has proven to hinder their learning process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Peacock, Murray et al., 2014; van der Kleij, 2019). A study by van der Kleij (2019), which explored formative assessment practices, revealed that although learners desire timely

assessment feedback, instead they received delayed (weeks after completing the task) feedback, which was no longer helpful in enhancing their learning. Another study that explored the experiences of health sciences students of receiving written formative feedback revealed that those students received delayed feedback, and thus did not use it to inform their learning (Peacock et al., 2014). A key challenge identified by students in this study was that it took a substantial period of time for them to receive written feedback from their teachers; thus, they received it when it was no longer useful. For this reason, students in this study reported that they preferred written feedback given through the ePortfolio as it was immediate and was considered useful in enhancing learning (Peacock et al., 2014). Timely feedback – feedback provided while learners are still mindful of the learning target and while there is still time for learners to act on it (Brookhart, 2017) – is most effective in supporting learning and will most likely lead to improved future academic performance (Swart et al., 2019).

### 2.5.2. *Specificity of Written Feedback*

Literature has revealed that effective feedback should consist of information that is specific to students' progress, and should specify how students should proceed (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Tanner, 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018). Literature has also pointed out that students often misunderstand written feedback that lacks specificity and that teachers tend to provide standardised feedback in the form of general phrases like 'good work'/'excellent', which, in turn, leave students confused in terms of what they need to do next to improve their learning (Engelsen & Smith, 2017). A study conducted in Australia, in English and mathematics classrooms, revealed that students desire written feedback that specifies achievement and how they can improve (van der Kleij, 2019). In support of this, one student participant commented that she wanted 'written feedback that explains more on how I can improve on a subject' (van der Kleij, 2019, p. 182). However, some student participants in this study reported that, even though they actively sought such feedback, their teachers would not provide them with the comments they requested (van der Kleij, 2019). The study also revealed that students desired written feedback that is specific to the individual student's work (van der Kleij, 2019). In support of this, one student wrote, 'I think feedback should be less targeted at the whole class and more individual' (van der Kleij, 2019, p. 182). Although students desired written feedback that is specific to their achievement, some of these students reported that they did not receive such written feedback which, in turn, constrained their learning (van der Kleij, 2019).

A similar study was conducted on feedback experiences of students undergoing surgical training (Vu et al., 2020). This was an exploratory qualitative study conducted at the University of Michigan to better understand how surgical students experience formative feedback received on leadership assessment (Vu et al., 2020). Leadership is one of the six essential competencies for medical education, according to the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (Vu et al., 2020). Participants in the study expressed a desire for feedback that was tailored to their unique performance and included suggestions for improvement. They did say, however, that the criticism they received was too general to aid them in making improvements. (Vu et al., 2020). One participant in

the study commented that ‘I get feedback comments like “Good job!” and I am thinking “Come on... tell me something else”’ (Vu et al., 2020, p. 47). The study also discovered that, despite the fact that effective leadership was still expected of them, their written assessments (feedback) did not focus on their leadership qualities (Vu et al., 2020). Clinical and technical learning were prioritised over leadership development in medical education, according to survey participants (Vu et al., 2020). The study concluded that feedback that lacks specificity is unlikely to support learning (Vu et al., 2020).

Several disciplines, including mathematics, physics, and languages, have investigated students’ reactions to getting written feedback on written examinations. Higher education has received a great deal of attention, but secondary school education has also received much attention. The lack of study on secondary school learners’ experiences of obtaining written feedback on written formative assessments in the South African environment, particularly in Grade 10 Business Studies, is noteworthy. It lends relevance to this research, which is attempting to fill this void. The majority of studies on learners’ experiences with receiving written feedback on written formative assessments ended with the presentation of findings. Following the discussion of findings, this study will provide implications for future feedback practices as well as recommendations for future research.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using case study research design. A qualitative approach is used to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of participants as they make meaning of their world (Smith, 2018). A case study research design was used to engage closely with the participants in order to develop deep insights into the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2012). Since it is a more comprehensive study of a particular situation rather than an in-depth statistical study, it affords a researcher an opportunity to focus on a particular and fascinating case (Creswell, 2012).

This study was rooted in the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm seeks to describe how people respond to objects in the world, based on the meaning they have attached to these objects (Cohen et al., 2017). The interpretive paradigm was suitable for the purpose of this study because it allowed the researchers to understand learners’ experiences of written feedback from the perspectives of the learners.

The study was conducted during the Coronavirus-19 pandemic. Coronavirus-19 (also referred to as COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome (Yelin et al., 2020). Hence, following the COVID-19 directives of social distancing and avoiding crowded places, the researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp voice calls.

Semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp voice calls were most suitable for this study because they helped the researchers to ensure meaningful participation from the study participants, specifically because this method allowed the

participants greater freedom, control and comfort during the interviews. WhatsApp voice communication is thought to be particularly comfortable for young people because of the greater ability it affords them to control a conversation, and because of decreased fear of social judgment in the absence of visual cues (Gibson, 2020). The semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp voice calls allowed for flowing discussions, and helped the researchers to obtain detailed information about the studied phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, 12 participants, six from each school, were interviewed for 45 minutes each. The semi-structured interviews took the form of a friendly chat via WhatsApp voice call, while trying to piece together different parts of the stories into a cohesive meaning (Aizenkot, 2020). We began each interview with a short explanation about the research, followed by a few personal background questions. Theming the interviews with the study participants was an inquiry into their experiences of receiving written feedback on Business Studies written formative assessment, how they used the written assessment feedback they received from their Business Studies teachers, and why they used written feedback the way they did. An interview guide, with questions which do not follow a specified order, was used to help in focusing the interview on the topic without constraining the participants to a particular format.

The data collection method required participants to use mobile devices and mobile data. The researchers informed study participants via participant information sheets that any mobile data costs incurred as a result of their participation in the study would be their own responsibility. Because participation in this study was entirely voluntary, it was limited to students who had access to a mobile device and mobile data.

#### **4. Method of Data Analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) assert the importance of the use of thematic analysis (TA) within qualitative research. They note that 'TA goes beyond counting words in a text (content analysis) to investigate explicit and implicit meanings in data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.16). The researchers used the six phases of thematic analysis to evaluate the data collected through semi-structured WhatsApp interviews. The steps did not need to be approached in a linear fashion because the researchers might need to move back and forth between the stages. Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis were applied as follows: 1. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the data and gaining a sense of familiarity with the semantic meanings. The researchers made notes about general observations that might later foster theme development. 2. Codes were then developed to capture key analytic ideas within the data which related to the research question. This was repeated to ensure that key codes were not missed. 3. Themes were generated by grouping codes which related to a particular concept. The themes identified patterns of meaning across the data. 4. The themes were reviewed in relation to the coded data and to the data as whole. A thematic map was used to structure the analysis and to define the relationships between the themes. 5. The themes were then defined and named. It is at this point that the researchers constructed an analytic narrative to explain what was happening in



the data, how this relates to the research question, and why the reader should pay attention to this. 6. The analysis was written up in a report.

## 5. Sampling

This study employed purposive and convenience sampling approaches. Purposive sampling is used when samples are chosen because they have specific features or characteristics that will allow for detailed exploration and understanding of the central questions that the researcher intends to investigate (Ritchie & Lewis, 2012). Cohen et al. (2017) argue that the purposive method is mostly suitable for small-scale research, that it is less complicated to set up and does not cost very much. This research study was a small-scale study, studying the learners' experiences with regard to their assessment feedback. Purposive sampling was effective to elicit rich and detailed data. In support, Martella et al., (2019) argue that, in utilising purposive sampling, the sample consists of a case that is rich in information from which the researcher can derive important data. According to Bell and Bryman (2012), purposive sampling is used when the researcher has an objective in mind and chooses a context that is significant to the research questions. The study participants were purposively selected according to their Grade 10 Business Studies Terms 1 and 2 academic performances. Six learners in each of the two schools were selected according to the following categories: lower (below 39%), middle (40–69%), and higher (above 69%) academic performance. This was done to ensure that data were collected from learners with varying academic performances in order to get a holistic understanding of learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessments.

The researchers sent emails to the principals of the respective schools from whom they received permission to invite learners to participate in this study and recommendations of Grade 10 Business Studies teachers who could help them to select the study participants according to their academic performance. The two recommended Grade 10 Business Studies teachers, one from each school, agreed to select the study participants according to their academic performance. Following the selection process, the researchers spoke to the participants through a WhatsApp group voice call for 45 minutes about the purpose of the study, to seek their opinions, and to probe their willingness to participate in the study. The researchers did this to ensure that the class teacher and they themselves, did not in any way coerce learners into participation; hence affording the learners the informed option to participate in the study voluntarily.

This study used a convenience sampling approach as it was limited intentionally to Business Studies learners in two public secondary schools in Johannesburg East, Gauteng. The researchers chose Grade 10 Business Studies students from two public secondary schools in Gauteng as participants because they thought they would be useful sources for the following reasons:

1. One of the researchers in this study has taught learners from school A for three consecutive years and she believed that she had built a good professional relationship with the learners; thus, the learners were more likely to feel

comfortable talking about their experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment with them.

2. One of the researchers in this study also offers extra Accounting lessons to learners from both schools; therefore, this allowed her to have convenient access to them. The researcher offers extra lessons to learners from school A during the week (after school hours) and to learners from school B on Saturdays.
3. These learners conveniently have access to mobile devices and internet connections within the selected schools' premises, so the researchers were able to collect data through WhatsApp and Microsoft teams.

## 6. Ethical Considerations

The study met the criteria for trustworthiness, which include validity, dependability, anonymity, and conformability. Throughout the study, the researchers relied on peers and colleagues for debriefings and member checks to establish credibility in a less intrusive manner (Guba, 1981). In addition, each participant received an email with a copy of his or her interview transcript for review. The researchers wanted to make sure participants were aware about any unusual experiences. If there were any discrepancies, an MS Teams meeting was held to ensure accuracy. Each participant reviewed their own transcript and found no errors necessitating a follow-up meeting.

In terms of transferability, it was critical to remember that a person's experiences are unique to them and are not generalisable to the general population. Because the participants were carefully chosen, there may be some transferability. Because the participants share some characteristics, such as identifying as South African, this type of selection may have resulted in study duplication (Guba, 1981). Dependability refers to the consistency of data and the accuracy of data interpretation (Guba, 1981). Leaving a clear audit trail, so that an external reviewer can determine how participants were selected and data was collected, analysed, and interpreted, aids in ensuring that all trustworthiness concepts are met (Guba, 1981). The researchers kept the basic structure of the interview consistent with each participant during data collection, but the process and line of questions may have changed depending on the conversation with the participant (Guba, 1981). In terms of conformability, the researchers provided a clear map of data interpretation and were forthcoming about specific assumptions (Guba, 1981). They were open and honest throughout the research.

The university at which the research was conducted provided ethical approval (Ethics approval number: 2020ECE006M), and the Gauteng Department of Education granted permission to conduct the study. Before the investigation began, all of the principals, parents, and teachers provided informed consent. To maintain anonymity, participants were identified using abbreviations (A-L to identify learners).

## 7. Findings

Learners were asked to share their experiences of receiving written formative feedback on their Business Studies written formative assessments. Their

responses revealed different experiences, which provided great insight into how assessment feedback influenced their learning of Business Studies. These experiences fit into the following themes: timing of formative feedback, and specificity of formative feedback.

### 7.1 Timing of Written Formative Feedback

The first sub-theme which emerged from learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback was the issue of the timing of formative feedback. Learners who participated in this study reported that they received delayed written formative feedback on their Business Studies written formative assessments. Learners' responses revealed that, while they preferred immediate written feedback, they often received written comments on their work three to four weeks after submission of a formative assessment task. For these learners, written formative feedback was not helpful because it was received when they had already forgotten the content that was assessed and had moved on to the next topic. Learners reported the following:

*I get written feedback 3 weeks after writing and submitting a task. This is not fair because it [feedback] comes when I have forgotten the topic that was tested. In most cases, I don't even remember the answers I wrote. - Learner B*

Another learner reported the following:

*I get feedback 3 to 4 weeks later. I remember receiving feedback on one assessment task after I had written three other tasks. I wrote the other tasks without knowing how well I did in the first one. When I finally received the feedback, I did not pay attention to it because it was too late.- Learner F*

Another learner emphasised the negative impact of delayed assessment feedback on academic performance by stating:

*I receive feedback 3 weeks after writing a task. It [feedback] doesn't help me much with improving my performance because it comes too late when there isn't much I can do to make sure I do better next time. - Learner L*

What emerged from the excerpts above is that learners in this study experienced delayed written formative feedback, which they could not use to inform their learning of Business Studies because they received it when they had forgotten the learning goals, the assessed topics, and when there was no time for them to act on it [feedback]. No learner reported an instance when they received timely feedback. All learners in this study reported that they received delayed written feedback for Business Studies written formative assessments, and this constrained them from identifying areas of strengths and the gaps in their learning at the time when they needed to do so.

While some learners in this study reported that they received delayed written feedback from their Business Studies teachers, others stated that they did not receive written feedback unless they specifically sought it out. These learners also reported that when they did seek written formative feedback, they received it weeks later. Responses extracted from the interviews read:

*I do not receive feedback unless I ask my teacher for it. We just write tasks after tasks without feedback. I want my teacher to come back to me and say I did well in this, I struggled with this, you know, I just want to know my progress, so I go to my teacher and ask for it [feedback]. – Learner J*

*I ask my teacher for feedback because if I don't, I won't get it. But even though I ask for feedback, I get it a few weeks after asking for it. – Learner H*

*We do not get feedback from our teacher, we only do corrections. But sometimes I go to the teacher to ask for feedback because I want to know what I have to do to improve. – Learner A*

When Learner A was probed to comment on how long it took to receive feedback after asking for it from the teacher, the learner responded as follows:

*It takes a long time ma'am, like 2–3 weeks. Sometimes you just ask for it [feedback] but you never know whether or not you will get it. – Learner A*

Generally, learners in this study complained that the timing of written formative feedback was disappointing. Multiple elements, including 'late feedback', and 'absence of feedback' were explanations provided for their negative experiences of receiving Business Studies written formative feedback. The learners also emphasised the importance of timely formative feedback in their learning of Business Studies. They pointed out that timely written feedback would help them to see their strengths and weaknesses early, and subsequently to come up with strategies to overcome their weaknesses while they are still mindful of the assessed topics. When learners were allowed to give any general comment relating to written formative feedback, they responded as follows:

*Feedback should be given on time, maybe 3 days after writing a task ... latest [laughs]. If I get feedback early, I will be able to fix my mistakes early, so that I don't repeat them in the next tasks. – Learner F*

*I think feedback should be provided immediately after we've submitted the task. Not immediately-immediately, but maybe a day or two after submission. If I get feedback early, I will pay attention to it because the tested topics will still be fresh in my mind. I can then work on my weaknesses and polish up my strengths. – Learner H*

The findings relating to the timing of written formative feedback suggest that the learners' experiences of receiving delayed written formative feedback increased the complexity of their learning of Business Studies, and this made it difficult for them to improve their academic performance. The findings also suggest that the learning of Business Studies was constrained owing to the 'absence' of and 'late' written formative feedback.

## 7.2 Specificity of Written Formative Feedback

The second theme which emerged from learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback was the issue of specificity of written formative feedback. Learners in this study reported that they received vague written comments that did not help them to see their mistakes and ways to improve their performance. They also reported that while they strongly preferred written formative feedback that pointed out specific sections and/or areas of their work that needed improvement, they often received written comments that were too vague and did not specify weak and strong sections of their work. Responses extracted from the interviews read as follows:

*I often receive comments like "next time pay attention to finer details of the questions to improve your results", especially when I have failed the task. What does this even mean, am I not reading the questions correctly? I want the teacher to tell me exactly what I am doing wrong! – Learner J*

*Recently I got a comment that read "A little more effort can improve your marks". And I was like huh? ... which section requires effort? What more could I have done? – Learner I*

*I get comments like "keep up the good work" and "well done". This doesn't help me understand what constitutes good work or even bad work. I want my teacher to tell me which section of my work is good and which section I need to work hard on. – Learner K*

What emerged from the excerpts above is that learners who participated in this study received written feedback that did not specify areas in their work that was well done and areas that needed improvement; thus, they considered feedback to be unhelpful in preparing them for future learning events. The responses above indicate that learners preferred written feedback that specified their learning progress – feedback that specified achievement and how they could improve. More importantly, learners in this study reported that, while trying to meet their teachers' expectations, they were still unsure about the qualities of good and/or bad work because the written feedback they received did not specify this. Furthermore, the interview data suggest that learners preferred written feedback that did not only specify good and weak sections of their work, and how to improve, but also feedback that specified assessment criteria (such as what constitutes good and/or bad work). This was perhaps an indirect way to express a wish for written feedback that specified why a specific section of their work was good and/or why it was weak.

Findings in this study also revealed that learners did not only receive broad yet vague written feedback on their written formative tasks but also received generalised feedback, which was not specific to their work. Learners in this study reported that they sometimes received the same written comments, irrespective of the difference in the quality of their work and the mark allocated. Responses extracted from the interviews read:

*Sometimes the teacher writes "good work" for everyone who got 50% and above and "needs improvement" for everyone who got below 50%. – Learner C*

*I do not know very well what I am good at and weak in after reading my teacher's feedback because sometimes the teacher writes the same comment for everyone, even when our marks are different. – Learner L*

Other learners reported that feedback that did not address specific points of their performance and was not specific to their academic progress was unhelpful, as it did not provide information that led to greater possibilities for the learning of Business Studies. Responses from the learners read:

*Feedback that is not specific to my work and my progress doesn't help me learn. Getting the same comment even though our marks are different just suggests that we are all the same in the classroom. But I don't think that is the case. – Learner D*

*I don't think the whole class should get the same comment, especially when our marks are not the same. I want feedback that is specific to my work because this shows that the teacher sees my efforts. Also, I can use such feedback when I study because it is specific to my learning progress. – Learner A*

*Getting the same comment as others is upsetting because it doesn't specify your level of understanding compared to someone else. – Learner B*

The above responses emphasised the importance of differentiated written formative feedback in helping learners to see their progress in their learning of Business Studies. The learners' responses above suggest that learners wanted to see the relevance of written formative feedback in their work, which would help them to study the subject content according to their understanding and/or misunderstanding of the assessed content knowledge. Learners also expressed that formative feedback that was not specific to their work caused frustrations and created a sense of unfairness because they received the same comment even though their work and the mark allocated were different to that of other learners.

Although most learners in this study were dissatisfied with the written formative feedback that did not specify strong and weak sections of their work, as well as feedback that was not specific to their work, for some learners the effect was the opposite as they seemed unaffected with this kind of written feedback. The responses from the learners read as follows:

*When I get comments like "good work" and "you can do better", I feel like the teacher appreciates my work and I become more confident and proud of myself and also more interested in studying harder to improve my marks. – Learner E*

*If my teacher comments "you can do better" it means s/he believes in me. So I take that as a motivation to study harder. – Learner G*

The responses above suggest that, for some learners, written formative feedback that was not specific to their performance and did not provide suggestions for improvement, did not hinder their learning of Business Studies but, in fact,

motivated them to study harder. This was perhaps an indirect way to express a wish to meet the teachers' expectations even though the feedback they received did not specify those expectations.

Generally, most learners in this study complained that the feedback they received lacked specificity; thus hindering their learning of Business Studies. Multiple elements, including lack of specificity of strong and weak sections of their work, lack of specific guidelines for improvement, and generalised feedback comments were explanations provided for their negative experience of receiving written formative feedback in Business Studies. The learners emphasised the importance of specificity of feedback comments in their learning of Business Studies. They pointed out that formative feedback that specified areas of improvement in their work would help them to direct their energy towards specific areas of the subject content that require attention, which could help them to learn strategies to improve their academic performance.

## **8. Discussion**

A distinct finding revealed that the timing of assessment feedback is one of the key variables in the feedback process that can either hinder or foster the effectiveness and usefulness of assessment feedback. This corresponds with prior studies (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Attali & van der Kleij, 2017; Quinn & Nakata, 2017; Swart et al., 2019). Learners' experiences related to the timing of receiving written formative feedback revealed that feedback practices in the school context fall short of the principles outlined in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Education [DoE], 2017) and the National Protocol for Assessment (NPA) (DoE, 2017). The Business Studies FET CAPS document and the NPA state that learners should receive timely assessment feedback – that is, feedback received when learners are still mindful of the content knowledge, assessed topics, and learning goals (DoE, 2017). Findings in this study revealed that learners received delayed feedback, which was reported to hinder the usefulness of formative feedback. In the context of this study, delayed feedback was considered to be feedback received three or more weeks after submission of an assessment task. Learners in this study reported that they received written formative feedback weeks after submitting a written formative assessment task, and thus did not use it to inform their learning of Business Studies as they received it [feedback] when it was too late to act on it.

The findings in this study support previous studies (Peacock et al., 2014; van der Kleij, 2019) which documented substantial evidence that learners do not use written feedback because they receive it too late – when they are no longer mindful of the content knowledge, topic or performance in question. It can be noted from the findings in this study that delayed written formative feedback hinders early detection and correction of flaws in understanding. From a social constructivist perspective, feedback cannot act as a scaffold for comprehension when it is received too late (Vygotsky, 1978). This is because delayed feedback hinders both teachers and learners from taking corrective action as early as possible. In cases of flaws in understanding, this hinders learning from feedback. Moreover, the social constructivism theory states that learning is a social process

that is activated through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Gredler, 2012). Timely assessment feedback has the potential to help learners to determine the 'distance' between their actual and potential level of development. Drawing from the findings in this study, one may argue that delayed formative feedback interferes with learners' cognitive development because it delays the development of advanced mental structures (which may be acquired through effective formative feedback), which, in turn, may delay learners from reaching their potential level of development.

It was also found that learners often did not receive written feedback unless they specifically sought it out and that, when they did seek feedback, they received it weeks later. This emphasises that learners in this study received delayed written feedback, whether or not they sought it out actively. The findings in this study indicate that delayed feedback is ineffective in supporting learning. Learners in this study reported that delayed feedback hindered them from devising learning strategies on time, in order to improve their future academic performance. From a social constructivist perspective, delayed feedback constrains learners from monitoring their learning progress and delays teacher-learner collaboration to monitor learners' current level of achievement according to the learning intentions (Sardareha & Saad, 2012). These social constructivist assumptions are in line with the findings in this study on the effect of delayed feedback, that is, delayed feedback seems to interrupt teacher-learner collaborative effort in the learning process, which subsequently constrains learners' understanding and knowledge construction (Sardareha & Saad, 2012).

The current study shows that written formative feedback is most effective in supporting learning if provided immediately (within a few days), instead of weeks after the submission of an assessment task. The study shows that delayed feedback constrains the usefulness of feedback, which could impede learning. Therefore, an attempt should be made by teachers to provide timely written formative feedback in order to enhance the effectiveness and usefulness of feedback as well as to encourage productive learning.

Findings in this study also revealed that Business Studies learners received written formative feedback that lacked specificity. Learners in the study reported that the written comments they received from their teachers on their assessment tasks were not specific to their learning progress and did not specify what they needed to do to improve their work and/or to prepare for future learning events. For this reason, learners in this study reported that they did not use feedback information because they were unsure about what they needed to do to improve the quality of their work.

The findings in this study correspond with the Vu et al. (2020) case study, which revealed that students did not use the written feedback they received on their course assessments because it was not specific to their performance and did not provide suggestions for improvement. Similarly, the findings in this study revealed that written feedback that lacked specificity hindered learners' engagement with feedback. Moreover, learners' experiences of receiving feedback



in this study suggest that feedback practices in the school context fall short of the principles outlined in the FET Business Studies CAPS document (DoE, 2017) and the NPA (DoE, 2017), which state that feedback should inform learners specifically about a gap between their current and desired academic performance as well as offer recommendations on how they can improve their learning. It can be noted from the reported learners' experiences of receiving written feedback in this study that feedback received by learners did not specify the gap between where they were in their learning and where they needed to be, which made it difficult for them to use feedback to inform their learning of Business Studies.

From a social constructivism perspective, feedback should help learners to monitor their current level of achievement according to the learning intentions (Sardareha & Saad, 2012). Feedback should specify learners' learning progress to enable learners not only to monitor their learning progress actively but also to control their success in the learning process (Sardareha & Saad, 2012). The findings in this study suggest that learners were not able to use written feedback to control their success actively in the learning process because the feedback they received on their learning tasks did not specify good and weak sections of their work, or how to improve.

It was also found that learners received generalised feedback that did not specify their learning progress. Learners in this study reported that they received the same comments irrespective of the difference in their work and the marks achieved. This finding corresponds with the findings in the case studies of Engelsen and Smith (2017) and van der Kleij (2019), which documented that learners received standardised feedback in the form of general phrases like 'try harder', 'good work', 'excellent work', which they could not use to inform their learning because the comments did not specify how an individual learner could improve his/her work. Similarly, the interview data in this study revealed that learners did not use written feedback because the generalised and standardised phrases they received from their teachers - which were not specific to their work - did not lead to greater learning possibilities.

As with any study, this study also has its limitations. The data for this study were collected at only one point in time (only in Term 3). Learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback could change over time. This study was unable to capture changes in any learner experiences of the phenomenon. This study explored the experiences of receiving written formative feedback from 12 learners from two different public schools. Therefore, results cannot be generalised since different schools may have different formative feedback practices - resulting in different experiences of receiving written formative feedback.

## **9. Conclusion and Implications**

The findings in this study suggest that written formative feedback that does not specify strong and weak sections of learners' work and how to address flaws in understanding, as well as written feedback that is not specific to an individual learner's learning progress, constrains the usefulness of feedback, which could

impede learning. Knowledge of these inhibiting factors is useful to heads of Business Studies departments in order to address and minimise challenges in Formative Assessment feedback (FAF) for Business Studies educators for effective implementation of FAF techniques in the Business Studies modules. This calls for professional development which allows the skills development programme to be directed by the teachers themselves, rather than adopting a top-down approach. This suggests a context-driven model for professional development, based on an 'inside-out' strategy. Learners should also be trained with techniques to develop self-regulatory capacities so that they can use feedback to improve their own learning.

It may be concluded that learners have been overlooked as a vital resource informing assessment feedback practice; there is a mismatch between learners' feedback needs and the feedback supplied. Hopefully, over time, feedback practices will be implemented in a circular fashion, allowing learners' feedback perspectives and needs to have an impact on enhancing teachers' feedback practices. This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature, specifically to FAF, with respect to the gaps identified in the introduction and literature review. To date, the literature has explored teachers' understanding or practices of FAF, and has mostly focused on in-service teachers. This study is perhaps the first to explore students' experiences of receiving written feedback on written coursework at high school level, in Grade 10 Business Studies in the South African context. Findings from this research can enable teachers to rethink their assessment feedback practice by encouraging learners to take responsibility for their learning and for the learning of others. This kind of feedback sustains the notion of communal learning where everybody takes part in the process of providing feedback.

## 10. References

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