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EXPLORING LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF RECEIVING WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON WRITTEN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: A CASE STUDY OF GRADE 10 BUSINESS STUDIES CLASSROOMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

BY

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A research report submitted to the University of Witwatersrand in part-fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Education degree

Witwatersrand School of Education

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Co-supervisor: Dr. Colwyn Martin

June 2021

DECLARATION

I Raudina Madina Balele (801621) declare that:

- The research reported in this research report, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
- This research report has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
- This research report does not contain other person's data, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
- This research report does not contain other person's writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:

a) Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced;

b) Where their exact words have been used, the writing has been placed inside quotation marks, and referenced.

- This research report does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the proposal and the references sections

Student's signature: R.M.Balele Date: 18 June 2021

SUPERVISORS' DECLARATION

As the candidate's supervisors, we agree to the submission of this research report.

Supervisor: Dr. Preya Pillay Signature:  Date: 18 June 2021

Co-supervisor: Dr. Colwyn Martin Signature: C Martin Date: 18 June 2021

DEDICATION

This research report is dedicated to my beloved mother, **Mavis Balele**, who raised me to believe that I could do anything. Ma, your words of encouragement and inspiration have never left my thoughts even long after you were gone. I hope you are happy in the presence of God. Thank you for raising a strong woman. I love you so much!

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Completing this research report has been personally challenging yet rewarding; the knowledge and experience gathered during this study is invaluable to me. However it would not have been possible without the support and guidance of several people:

Firstly, I would like to thank God, my beloved Father for all the love, mercy and blessings that He has given and shown during the time of completing this research report. Thank you for the wisdom and knowledge you have given me throughout my study and my life.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARG	: Assessment Reform Group
CAPS	: Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
DoE	: Department of Education
FET	: Further Education and Training
GET	: General Education and Training
ICT	: Information and Communication Technology
MTT	: Ministerial Task Team
MS Teams	: Microsoft Teams
NCS	: National Curriculum Statement
NPA	: National Protocol for Assessment
OBE	: Outcome-Based Education
TA	: Thematic Analysis
ZPD	: Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. INTRODUCTION

This study explored how high school learners' in South Africa comprehend and subsequently utilize formative feedback. It explored how learners receive, interpret and respond to feedback in a form of written comments on written formative assessment. In this chapter, I provide the background and contextual information relevant to this study. The chapter starts by discussing assessment practices and changes in South African classrooms, followed by a brief discussion of the rationale, the research objectives and research questions for this study. The chapter then outlines the context of the study and the underlying framework that underpins it. Towards the end, there is a discussion about the research design and methodology adopted in the study, and finally, a comprehensive overview of the five chapters is presented.

1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the educational conception of assessment has gone through distinctive reforms in many countries (Gumede & Biyase, 2016). This has led to significant changes in the teaching and learning environment, especially in the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy (Black & William, 1998a; Earl & Katz, 2008). Many countries have made changes in their assessment practices to improve learners' learning and academic outcomes. These changes are often reflected in national policy statements and guidelines for professional development related to the focus of assessment (Earl & Katz, 2008). In South Africa, those changes are critical to the integrated assessment of teaching and learning (Department of Education [DoE], 2003, 2007, 2012). Carless (2009) revealed that in South Africa, during the apartheid era, assessment was driven by authoritarian concerns for learning, by rote, what had been canonized by apartheid education bureaucrats as worthwhile knowledge in all subjects. Adherence to routine and reliance on testing and examinations as assessment methods dominated (Carless, 2009). The examinations were norm-referenced; therefore the academic performance of each

learner was compared with the norm or average performance of other learners (Jansen, 1995). Assessment was regarded as an afterthought and was not integrated into the teaching and learning process (Carless, 2009). Assessment was primarily summative, which set to measure and quantify how well learners had memorized the information imparted to them (Carless, 2009). Because assessment tasks put emphasis on content and factual recall, and "often entailed learning in parrot-fashion" (Cockburn, 1997, p. 5), learners who could not regurgitate the subject content would fail a grade because of a single test or examination (Cockburn, 1997). As such, teachers ended up teaching for tests rather than being resourceful and using their professional judgment during classroom instruction (Carless, 2009).

The introduction of the new curriculum (Curriculum 2005, called the National Curriculum Statement) in 1997 based on the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) philosophy, brought about changes in the assessment practices for teachers in South African schools. The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2007) stated that assessment should inform learners of their actual level of performance as well as what they need to do to improve their academic performance (DoE, 2007). Assessment was now seen as a tool to create an atmosphere for life-long learning which encouraged learners to reflect on their own learning and to make value judgments of their strengths and weaknesses (Carless, 2009). The DoE policy also stressed that the main purposes of assessment was individual growth and development of the learner (DoE, 2007). Formative assessment was encouraged as being an integral part of the teaching and learning process, and was used to influence or inform this process (Carless, 2009). In 2009, the Ministerial Task Team (MTT) was appointed to review the implementation of the National Curriculum Statements (NCS) in grades R - 12. The Review Committee found that assessment standards were too vague and limited in the extent to which they show progression (Carless, 2009). Following the recommendations of the task team, the NCS was amended and one Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was developed for each school subject (DoE, 2012).

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements support formative assessment because it involves learners, allowing them to share their experiences of assessment and the

reasons for having those experiences - this can provide insights useful to the teaching and learning process (Nicol, 2009). As reflected in 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, 2012, p. 14). This means that assessment is "inextricably linked" to teaching and learning, and shift the emphasis from a summative to a formative purpose of assessment (Nicol, 2009). 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 learners’ academic performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

More specifically, in the South African school context, where policy documents increasingly emphasize the need for formative assessment (also referred to as assessment *for* learning), good quality formative feedback is a crucial source of reference which learners can use to identify a gap in their learning, and from which they can find recommendations to close the gap (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002). 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, emphasizes the importance of feedback by stating that:

> *Formative assessment feedback should provide indication of learner achievement in the most effective and efficient manner and should be used to close gaps in learners’ knowledge and skills and improve teaching. Feedback should be provided after assessment to enhance the learning experience* (DoE, 2012, p.3).

Clearly, 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, 2006). Feedback can encourage in-depth learning, develop thinking skills and help learners prepare for future learning events (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). While feedback is often regarded as the central component that enhances teaching and learning, there seems to be a lack of concern about learners’ experiences of receiving formative feedback, specifically in the South African school context.

Scholars like Hattie and Timperley (2007); Naidoo, (2007); Iron (2008); and Mostert & Quinn (2009) have emphasized the need to analyse learners' understanding of feedback information. Literature pertaining to formative assessment feedback has revealed that understanding learners' experiences of assessment feedback is important as it helps one to provide feedback which encourages and helps learners to do better (Jones, Hoppitt, James, Prendergast, Rutherford, Yeoman & Young, 2012). Literature also revealed that most studies on assessment feedback have been done overseas, with only a few references to the South African context. More specifically, such research focused only on tertiary students' experiences of receiving formative feedback (Carless, 2006; Chidiebere, 2015; Peacock, Murray & Scott, 2010). Therefore, the lack of research on the phenomenon in the South African school context and in secondary school Business Studies prompted this study.

1.3. **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

Literature on formative feedback reveals large volumes of research pointing to higher education from the lecturer's, institution and researcher's point of view. Very limited research is conducted into learners' experiences of receiving and engaging with formative feedback at the school level (Nicol, 2009; Carless, 2006 & 2009). Hence, greater clarity and insights are required on how learners actually experience and use formative feedback. Of importance too, I believe, is the gap identified by Carless (2006) that learners are often overlooked as a vital resource to inform assessment feedback practice. This oversight compounds the mismatch between learner feedback needs and the feedback supplied. More research is therefore required to find out how learners receive and use formative feedback to inform their learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Jones, Hoppitt, James, Prendergast, Rutherford, Yeoman & Young, 2012).This research gave me an opportunity to advance my knowledge and understanding of formative feedback practices in the schooling context and enhanced my understanding of how learners receive and respond to formative feedback on their formative assessments. This research also gave me an opportunity to engage and contribute to debates about formative feedback practices in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase in particular.

My learners' complaints about the formative feedback they receive on Business Studies formative assessments raised issues of the effectiveness of teacher feedback. It is for this reason that I decided to embark on a journey of exploring learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on their written formative assessments. This journey gave me closure about my own formative feedback practices, giving me an opportunity to rigorously reflect on my personal experience of providing written formative feedback. Through this study, I gained knowledge and understanding of learners' experiences of receiving formative feedback to then apply it in my own micro environment to support learners' learning.

By doing this research on learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in the FET phase, specifically in grade 10 Business Studies, this study hoped to contribute to a new body of knowledge. I hope that this study will contribute to existing knowledge and reveal neglected areas for future research relating to learners experiences of formative feedback. The study could be beneficial for qualified teachers, student teachers and educational leaders who would like to improve their assessment and feedback practices to improve teaching and learning.

1.4. **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Formative feedback is universally viewed as an important component of the formative assessment process as well as one of the strongest educational tools that have the potential to enhance learning (Hattie & Timperly, 2007; Stobart & Gipps, 2010). Taking into consideration the role that formative feedback plays in enhancing learning, this study sought to: (1) explore learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on Business Studies written formative assessment; (2) explore how Business Studies learners use written formative assessment feedback to inform their learning and (3) understand why Business Studies learners use written formative assessment feedback the way they do. While there is a broad consensus that learners respond to and potentially use feedback, it remains unclear what shapes how they receive and subsequently use formative feedback. Therefore, exploring learners' experiences of receiving formative feedback and how they respond to it may explain what shapes how they receive, interpret and respond to formative feedback.

1.5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to explore learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment, this study attempted to answer the following key questions:

1. What are learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on Business Studies written formative assessment?
2. How do learners use the written formative feedback they receive on their Business Studies written formative assessment tasks?
3. Why do learners have such experiences of written formative assessment feedback on Business Studies written formative assessment?

1.6. RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study was conducted in the Gauteng province, and reports on experiences of grade 10 Business Studies learners from two public secondary schools located in Johannesburg East. The two secondary schools are located in the urban area, with electricity and good network coverage. Both schools offer free internet access to their learners. This was favorable for my study as the research was conducted through technology-mediated communication, which required participants to have internet access and/or mobile data.

1.7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study drew on the principles of the social constructivism theory to explore learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment. Social constructivism theory posits that an individual plays an active role in building and making sense of information (Martinez, 2010; Woo & Reeves, 2007). It maintains that individuals construct their own reality as a result of active participation and social interactions with others in a socio-cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on this social constructivist perspective, this study explored how learners make sense of written feedback on written formative assessment, and how they ultimately use it to construct new understanding of the content knowledge, thereby

enhancing their own learning. Furthermore, social constructivists emphasize that learners can, with the help of the knowledgeable other (teacher), begin to grasp concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own (Woo & Reeves, 2007). In this regard, giving learners formative feedback is viewed as a process in which the teacher helps learners identify where they are in their learning in relation to where they are supposed to be (Sardareha & Saadb, 2012). Based on this view, this study explored how learners use their teachers' written feedback on their written formative assessment to move from their actual to their potential cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

1.8. OUTLINE OF RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A research design is an approach used by a researcher to collect and analyse the data that is required to answer the research questions (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2011). This study employed a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach is concerned with unveiling aspects of social life through generating words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2007). A qualitative research approach was favorable for this study because it aimed to provide deep and quality information about how learners receive, interpret and respond to written feedback on written formative assessment. Within the qualitative framework, I adopted a case study research design. A case study is a more comprehensive study of a particular situation rather than an in-depth statistical study (Smith, 2012); it affords a researcher an opportunity to focus on particular and fascinating case (Creswell, 2012). A case study research design was most appropriate for this study because it afforded me an opportunity to engage closely with the participants in order to develop deep insights into the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2012).

The philosophical view underlying this study came from the interpretivism theory - hence the 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., 2011). An interpretive paradigm was suitable for the purpose of this study because it allowed me to understand learners' experiences of receiving written feedback from learners' perspectives. The purpose of an interpretive paradigm is to develop an in-depth understanding of how individuals

make sense of their social context (Mugo, 2011). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm was suitable for this study because it explored several critical issues about how learners receive and use written feedback on written formative assessment (De Vos, Strydo, Fouche & Delport, 2005).

This study was conducted during the coronavirus19 (also referred to as covid-19) pandemic. Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by a serious respiratory syndrome (Segars, Katler, McQueen, Kotlyar, Glenn, Knight, Feinberg, Taylor, Toner & Kawwas, 2020). The virus is spread between people during close contact, often via small droplets produced by coughing, sneezing, or talking (Segars et al., 2020). To reduce the spread of this virus, the South African government put in place preventive measures including staying at home, avoiding crowded places, and keeping distance from others (Segars et al., 2020). For this reason, this study adopted two technology-mediated data generation methods. To collect data, I used semi-structured interviews which were conducted through WhatsApp voice calls and a focus group interview which was conducted through Microsoft (MS) Teams video call. These data generation methods gave me an opportunity to communicate and interact with the study participants while abiding to the covid-19 preventative measures. Furthermore, in this study I adopted Thematic Analysis (TA) as a method to analyse the data that was generated from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

1.9. **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

The structure of this study consists of five chapters:

The first chapter is an introductory chapter that presents a brief overview of this study. The chapter outlines the background of the study and the rationale for embarking on the study. The chapter also outlines the research objectives and key research questions. Finally the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the study context, theoretical framework, the research design and methodology that was used in this study.

The second chapter provides a literature review relating to students' experiences of receiving written formative feedback across different disciplines. The chapter begins with a detailed discussion of the meaning and purpose of formative assessment,

followed by a discussion of formative assessment in Business Studies, the purpose of formative feedback and factors influencing the effectiveness of formative feedback. The chapter then presents both international and local literature on students' experiences of receiving written formative feedback, and subsequently provides the implications of the literature. The chapter also provides a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework that was used in this study.

The third chapter outlines the research design and the research methodology in which I give reasons as to why I chose to adopt a qualitative case study approach and to locate this study in the interpretive paradigm. The chapter begins with a theoretical discussion of the research design and methodology, and goes on to discuss the data generation and data analysis methods that were used in this study. The chapter concludes with detailed issues of sampling, trustworthiness, ethical considerations and methodological limitations.

The fourth chapter presents the findings about learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment. The findings are presented with direct quotations of the study participants' responses from the semi-structured and focus group interviews.

The fifth chapter presents a summary of the chapters and a discussion of the findings in this study. The findings are discussed with reference to the theoretical framework and in relation to the literature that is provided in chapter 2. The chapter also presents the conclusions that have emerged from the study on the way learners' experience and use written formative feedback on their written formative assessment in grade 10 Business Studies. Towards the end, the chapter discusses the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

1.10. **CONCLUSION**

This introductory chapter explained the background, the rationale and the objectives of this study. The chapter also outlined the research questions, the context of the study, the theoretical framework, the research design and methodology, as well as an

overview of the study. The next chapter will present a literature review and outline the theoretical framework that guided this study.

CHAPTER 2A

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I outlined the background, the rationale and the objectives of this study. I also outlined the research questions, the context, the theoretical framework, the research methodology and an overview of this study. This chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to this study and the theoretical framework that underpins it. A researcher compiles a literature review to find the body of knowledge which already exists, as well as to find gaps in their field of study (Pillay, 2013). A literature review is defined as a critical evaluation of research findings relating to a specific topic (Boote & Beile, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of a literature review is to outlines existing knowledge, including substantive findings, as well as theoretical and methodological contributions to a particular topic (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The literature that was reviewed for this study is outlined according to the following topics and themes:

- Meaning of formative assessment
- Purpose of formative assessment
- Formative assessment in Business Studies
- Definition and purpose of assessment feedback
- Modes of assessment feedback
- Factors influencing the effectiveness of feedback
- A review on students' experiences of receiving assessment feedback:
    - Perceived relevance of written assessment feedback
    - Focus on mark-loss not on formative feedback
    - Specificity of written assessment feedback
    - Clarity of written assessment feedback

- Valence of written assessment feedback
- Use of written feedback

- Implications of the literature

2.2. **MEANING OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT**

Formative assessment (assessment *for* learning) "…does not have a tightly defined and widely accepted meaning" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 7). However, it has been recognized as one of the most effective ways to facilitate learners' learning (Cauley & McMillan, 2010; Duers & Brown, 2009; Köhlen, 2017). Formative assessment differs from summative assessment (also referred to as assessment *of* learning) in the frequency of administration, the relative length of the assessment, and instructional purpose (Bottge, 2010). While summative assessment usually occurs after learning has taken place; and as such, it has its own legitimized function in teacher education (e.g., serving an accountability warrant) (Tillema, 2010), formative assessment occurs in alignment with classroom instruction and learning (Zimmermann, 2000).

Formative assessment is fundamentally a collaborative act that takes place between the teacher and learners (Hansen, 2020). Some researchers define formative assessment as a set of classroom procedures whereby "evidence about learner achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited" (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 9). Others define formative assessment as techniques used by teachers during the learning process, to obtain immediate feedback on how the learners' learning is progressing (Heritage, 2011). Formative assessment is also defined as the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go to and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group [ARG], 2002; Stobart & Gipps, 2010). Drawing from these definitions, it may be said that formative assessment is an educational tool that provides teachers and learners with information that can be used

as feedback to modify the teaching and learning process (Hansen, 2020; Heritage, 2011; Stobart & Gipps, 2010).

Formative assessment is conducted through formal and informal assessment activities throughout the learning process (Carless, 2009). It is seen as a tool to create an atmosphere for life-long learning which encourages learners to continuously reflect on their own learning and to make value judgments of their strengths and weaknesses (Carless, 2009). This form of assessment is explicitly intended to support learners' learning, thus defines the role of the learner as an active, creative, and reflective participant in the learning process (Shute & Zapata-Rivera, 2010). Learning environments that make use of formative assessment typically include individualized instruction, along with hands-on, authentic learning activities (Shute & Zapata-Rivera, 2010). Formative assessment tasks can include classroom questioning and discussions (Chin, 2006), observation of activities (Leat & Nichols, 2000), and written extended-response questions (Nieswandt & Bellomo, 2009). 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, 2012). It may therefore be said that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and can raise standards of achievement, specifically when it is complemented by effective formative feedback (Nicol, 2009).

2.3. **PURPOSE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT**

Formative assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and serves different purposes as it is intended to assist and enhance the learning process rather than to measure what learners have learned (Stobart & Gipps, 2010). Formative assessment can be used to inform the teaching and learning process "so that further learning can take place" (Stobart & Gipps, 2010, p. 206). The assumption associated with formative assessment is that it can help teachers to identify what learners know, so that further teaching can build on that (Stobart & Gipps, 2010). In other words, the purpose of formative assessment is to assist teacher to identify learners' prior knowledge so that classroom instruction can build on this knowledge in order to assist learners to progressively move towards more complex forms of knowledge (Stobart & Gipps, 2010).

Another purpose of formative assessment is to assist teachers to quickly and efficiently identify learners in need of support, create instructional targets for those learners, monitor learner growth toward those goals, and then determine when intervention and supports need to be altered or are no longer needed (Clark, 2012). This suggests that formative assessment may be used for decision making purposes; to assist teachers make decisions about the adaptation or differentiation of classroom instruction around the most critical areas of need, and receive continuous and immediate feedback about how well their instruction is working (Clark, 2012).

Another assumption associated with formative assessment is that it can encourage learners to play an active role in the learning process, thus it can be used by learners for the purpose of monitoring and regulating their own learning (Stobart & Gipps, 2010). Learners can use formative assessment to gather information about their own on-going understanding of the content knowledge (Nicol, 2009), and may use this information to enhance their learning and improve their academic performance. Research conducted around formative assessment and its impact on learner achievement reveals a positive correlation between assessment and academic achievement (Biggs & Tang 2011; Hattie & Timperley 2007). A study by Hanover Research (2014) revealed that learners who consistently complete frequent formative assessments throughout the learning process perform better on a variety of indicators than their peers who do not (Hanover Research, 2014). A similar study conducted in Britain that drew from more than 250 articles on formative assessment revealed that formative assessment does improve learning and academic achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The study concluded that not only is formative assessment an essential component of classroom work, but also that implementing formative assessment practices can raise standards of achievement more effectively than any other strategy (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In this regard, it may be said that the legitimate purposes of formative assessment is to provide feedback, improve learners' academic performance and permit realistic adjustment of proximal learning goals (Brookhart, 2010).

2.4. **FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN BUSINESS STUDIES**

Business Studies is one of 29 Further Education and Training (FET) subjects and falls within the group of commercial subjects known as Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) (Russell, 2009). At the General Education and Training (GET) and lower levels, learners study EMS to get a commercial grounding, but at FET level they can do any combination of Accounting, Business Studies and Economics as part of their choice subjects (Russell, 2009). Business Studies is a school subject that aims to prepare FET learners to become successful, economically active citizens in their chosen careers and in so doing, contribute to the growth of the South African and international economies (Russell, 2009). As noted in the FET Business Studies Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), this commercial subject deals with "the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values critical for informed, productive, ethical and responsible participation in the formal and informal economic sectors" (Department of Education [DoE], 2012, p. 8). The subject encompasses business principles, theory and practice that underpin the development of entrepreneurial initiatives, sustainable enterprises and economic growth (DoE, 2012).

The Business Studies FET CAPS document emphasizes the need for formative assessment as an important tool to monitor teaching and learning (DoE, 2012). Business Studies formative assessment tasks are expected to cover not only essential business knowledge, skills and principles, but also promote entrepreneurial initiatives, sustainable enterprises and economic growth (DoE, 2012). Business Studies covers valuable skills such as leadership, risk taking, problem solving and management skills that prepare learners for success in different business environments. Therefore, formative assessment tasks should enhance the learning of these skills (DoE, 2012). In grade 10 Business Studies, the following forms of formative assessment tasks are preferred, although they are not the only ones that may be used: class tests, case studies, class discussions, group-work, and oral presentations (DoE, 2012, p. 47).

The assessment practice in grade 10 Business Studies involves 6 formative assessments and 2 summative assessments (mid-year and final examination) over one school year. The 6 formative assessments consist of 3 Business Studies

assignments/projects and 3 formative tests. Although this subject involves 6 official formative assessments, CAPS and NPA encourage Business Studies teachers to administer daily formative assessments to monitor teaching and learning (DoE, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, 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 recommendations of how they can improve their learning (DoE, 2012; Hansen, 2020; Heritage, 2011; Stobart & Gipps, 2010). Although formative assessment and formative feedback is widely applied as a means of instruction in business education today, little is known about learners' experiences of receiving formative feedback (Russell, 2009). Therefore, this study sought to provide more insight into learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on written Business Studies formative assessment.

2.5. **DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK**

Feedback is an important component of the formative assessment process (Stobart & Gipps, 2010). It is a multifaceted concept that has multiple definitions offered by literature. 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 (Hattie & Gan, 2011). Different authors provide a similar conception of the term 'feedback' (Iron, 2008; Ngwenya & Maistry, 2012). Feedback is any information which enhances learners' learning based on comments relating to their learning (Iron, 2008). Feedback is also defined as any information that gives learners knowledge about their understanding, or lack thereof, of the content knowledge (Ngwenya & Maistry, 2012). 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 (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014). Additionally, feedback is defined as any information that is given to learners to inform them if their responses to an assessment task are right or wrong (Brookhart, 2008).

In South Africa, formative assessment feedback is regarded as the most trusted educational tool that can help learners identify the strong and weak points in their academic performance, as well as learn what they need to do next to improve their

future performance (Hamamorad, 2016). Researchers have argued that feedback should help learners to develop into self-regulated individuals who can use feedback information to improve their own learning (Gardner, Harlen, Hayward & Stobart, 2010; Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2013; Wiliam, 2011). For this reason, it can be said that the need for continuous formative feedback in the process of teaching and learning is undeniable (Hamamorad, 2016). Feedback is used for various reasons, however Sambell et al. (2013) state that the basic purposes for feedback are:

- To help increase learners' academic competence,
- To makes learners aware of their strengths and weaknesses,
- To provide learners with guidance to bridge the gap in their learning,
- To promote learners' confidence and attitude towards learning,
- To help develop learners' self-regulatory capacities.

Feedback can make the teacher aware of each learner's strengths and weaknesses (Hamamorad, 2016). It can also provide an opportunity for the teacher to reflect on their teaching style or methodology and make the necessary changes in order to make the teaching, learning process more successful (Hamamorad, 2016). Feedback is a vital ingredient for success, thus it is almost impossible to improve knowledge and support skill acquisition in an educational context without the use of feedback (Sambell et al., 2013). Although assessment feedback have been studied as a powerful educational tool (Sambell et al., 2013), there seems to be a lack of concern about how learners receive, interpret and respond to assessment feedback (Jones, Hoppitt, James, Prendergast, Rutherford, Yeoman & Young, 2012). This study sought to unveil learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback as well as reasons why learners receive and use written formative feedback the way they do, specifically in grade 10 Business Studies classrooms in the South African school context.

2.6. **MODES OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK**

There are different modalities that can be used to deliver assessment feedback to learners (Brookhart, 2008). In the South African school context, assessment feedback is most likely to be made available to learners through verbal and written modalities (Rae, 2008).

2.6.1. **Verbal feedback**

Verbal feedback is explained as oral comments about the learners' performance in a particular assessment task (Chidiebere, 2015). It is used by teachers to verbally communicate any information that gives learners knowledge about their understanding, or lack thereof, of the assessed content knowledge (Carless, 2006). The following are some of the benefits of providing verbal assessment feedback; it allows for provision of immediate feedback, it is time saving, and it promotes verbal teacher-learner interaction (Swinson and Knight, 2007; Chidiebere, 2015). Verbal assessment feedback also brings personal warmth and friendliness and develops a sense of bonding because of this contact between teacher and learner (Chidiebere, 2015). Although verbal feedback may be viewed as beneficial for both teachers and learners, there are challenges associated with this mode of providing feedback, including the following: learners may find it difficult to remember all the information provided through verbal feedback; learners may misunderstand verbal feedback; absence of permanent record hinders using verbal feedback as a source of reference later (Swinson and Knight, 2007; Chidiebere, 2015).

The above discussion provided the definitions, benefits and challenges of providing verbal assessment feedback. This study acknowledges that verbal assessment feedback may be viewed as a powerful mode of providing learners with information to enhance their learning. However, the study focused specifically on learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessments.

2.6.2. **Written feedback**

Written feedback is one of the fruitful modes of giving feedback to learners' in secondary school (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lochtman, 2002). It involves written comments only and it is often given to learners after they have completed an

assessment (Hyland, 2008). Providing written feedback is one significant responsibility on the side of teachers. This is because if teachers are to provide written feedback, they have to ensure that it facilitates academic improvement and motivation towards learning (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Different authors have highlighted advantages associated with written feedback. One notable advantage of written feedback is that it is permanent (Swinson & Knight, 2007). Unlike verbal feedback, which learners can easily forget, written feedback can be used as a source of reference as it allows for lasting records (Swinson and Knight, 2007). Another advantage of written feedback is that it can be well planned (Swinson & Knight, 2007). Well planned and well written feedback can ensure better interpretation and understanding for the learner (Swinson & Knight, 2007).

Like any other mode of providing feedback, written feedback brings to the education context some disadvantages. It is almost impossible to provide immediate written feedback because this mode of feedback may take substantial amount of time to produce (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). For this reason, written feedback may be provided to learners when it is no longer helpful to them (Black and Wiliam, 2006). Another disadvantage is that learners may interpret written feedback incorrectly (Taras, 2006). A negative or incorrect interpretation of written feedback may demotivate learners and constrain further learning (Taras, 2006). Written feedback is dependent on the eligibility of the teacher's handwriting (Fyfe, Rittle-Johnson & DeCaro, 2012). If the teacher's handwriting is not clear, leaners may misinterpret and misunderstand written feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). For this reason, learners may find it difficult to use unclear feedback to enhance their own learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

Despite the challenges associated with this mode of providing feedback, studies on assessment feedback have revealed that written feedback is the most preferred and commonly used mode of giving feedback to learners, especially in South African classrooms (Mostert & Quinn, 2009; Iron, 2008; Naidoo, 2007). Literature on written assessment feedback has revealed that learners prefer written feedback over any other mode of giving feedback (alfehaid, Qotineha, Alsuhebanya, Alharbia & Almodaimegha, 2018; Chidiebere, 2015; van der Kleij, 2019). A study on formative assessment reported that 83% of the secondary school learners involved in the study preferred written

feedback (Lee, 2004). A similar study revealed that secondary school learners favored written feedback that locates the error, explains the nature of the error, and provides the correct form (Chen & Liu, 2016). Moreover, a study on teacher feedback practices revealed that many teachers feel they must write substantial comments on papers to provide learners with information that justifies the mark that has been allocated (Hyland 2003).Therefore this study sought an in-depth understanding of learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on their written formative assessment, specifically in Business Studies classrooms.

2.7. **FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FEEDBACK**

Large volume of research has shown the effects of assessment feedback on learners' performance (e.g. Jaehnig & Miller, 2007; Shute, 2008; van der Kleij, Eggen, Timmers, & Veldkamp, 2012; van der Kleij, Feskens, & Eggen, 2015). Providing learners with effective assessment feedback regarding their academic performance is crucial to reinforce their learning; however, it is found to be a challenging task (Zehra, Tariq, Ali, Motiwala and Boulet, 2015). This section discusses some of the factors that influence the effectiveness of assessment feedback.

2.7.1. **The timing of assessment feedback**

The timing of assessment feedback is a widely studied but poorly understood variable in the feedback process (Attali & van der Kleij, 2017). Literature provides different ideas on the optimal timing for providing feedback (Swart, Nielen and Sikkema-de Jong, 2019). The timing of feedback refers to "the juncture in the instructional sequence when learners' errors are addressed" (Quinn & Nakata, 2017, p. 59). Previous studies that focused on the issue of timing of assessment feedback have shown the comparison between immediate feedback (provided during or right after the assessment task) and delayed feedback (provided days after the assessment task) (Dempsey & Wager, 1988; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Metcalfe, Kornell, & Finn, 2009; Mory, 2004; Shute, 2008). From a theoretical perspective, one could argue for both: providing feedback during the assessment task and/or providing feedback after the assessment task. Assessment feedback could best be provided during the assessment task based on the view that that feedback helps learners to evaluate and adjust their knowledge while working on

the task, so that misunderstandings can be detected and corrected as soon as possible (Swart, Nielena & Sikkema - de Jonga, 2019). From a cognitive perspective, one could argue that feedback should be provided after the assessment task to reduce learners' cognitive load (Sweller, 1994; Sweller, van Merrienboer, & Paas, 1998). In line with this reasoning, it might be better to provide feedback directly after the assessment task instead of during the assessment task, so that learners' limited working memory capacity can fully be deployed to create a mental model of the learning task (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Swart et al., 2019).

Although assessment feedback may be immediate or slightly delayed, it is crucial that it is provided when it is still useful to learners (Brookhart, 2008). Learners need to receive feedback while they are still mindful of the content knowledge, topic or performance in question (Brookhart, 2008). Previous studies on 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; Sweller, 1994; Subrahmanyam et al., 1994). It may therefore be said that assessment feedback is most effective when it is received during the time when learners are still mindful of and still striving for the learning goal (Brookhart, 2008).

Timely feedback is a key component of the assessment process (Evans, 2013; Weaver, 2006) and it is useful in improving the quality of learners' learning as well as promoting changes in the classroom (Gaertner, 2014). However, substantial literature on formative assessment feedback practices reveal that in most cases, learners receive delayed assessment feedback which has proven to hinder their learning process (Havnes et al., 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Peacock et al., 2010; van der Kleij, 2019). A study that explored formative assessment practices revealed that although learners desire timely assessment feedback, they instead received delayed (weeks after completing the task) feedback which was no longer helpful in enhancing their learning (van der Kleij, 2019). Another study that explored health science students' experiences of receiving written formative feedback revealed that students received delayed feedback, thus did not use it to inform their learning (Peacock, Murray & Scott, 2010). One participant in the study commented: "I just look at it and read it but that's it because that's the past. I don't want

to be bothered much" (Peacock et al., 2010, p. 314). A key challenge identified by students in this study was that it took a substantial amount of time for them to receive written feedback from their teachers, thus 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 considered useful in enhancing learning (Peacock et al., 2010).

In summary, the timing of feedback is an important factor that can either constrain or enhance the effectiveness of assessment feedback. Therefore, it may be said that 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, 2008) – is most effective to support learning and will most likely lead to improved future academic performance (Swart et al., 2019).

2.7.2. **The amount of assessment feedback**

What is the correct amount of written formative feedback? The answer to this question has been heavily debated (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Goldstein, 2004; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Truscott, 2004). Several studies have shown that providing the right amount of formative feedback is useful in improving learning (Montgomery & Baker, 2007), however there is still an on-going debate regarding the correct amount of written feedback. The amount of feedback information given to learners on their assessment tasks should neither be scanty nor overwhelming (Brookhart, 2008). Effective formative feedback contains usable amount of information that learners can absorb (Ramani & Krackov, 2012). Good amount of feedback is "not too much, not too little, but just right" (Brookhart, 2008, p. 13). It contains enough comments to ensure that learners understand what to do but not so much that the work has been done for them (Brookhart, 2008).

Many research articles have addressed the issue of the amount of formative assessment feedback (Brookhart, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Jaehnig & Miller, 2007; Mason & Bruning, 2001; Narciss & Huth, 2004; Swart et al., 2019; van der Kleij et al., 2015). A meta-analysis study that investigated the effect of feedback on learning from text in conventional readers revealed that voluminous amount of assessment

feedback creates unnecessary load on the limited working memory capacity of the learner, while the ‘correct’ amount of feedback can provide learners with usable information that may enhance the learning process (Swart et al., 2019). One major limitation of this study is that the authors failed to take into consideration the differences in learners’ reading levels because while voluminous feedback may create unnecessary cognitive load and impede learning from feedback, for some learners, more feedback information could be a valuable help to integrate the information from the text into a coherent mental model (Swart et al., 2019).

Another study explored the average amount of feedback given to English second language learners in relation to their academic performance (low pass, pass, and high pass) to determine whether the amount of feedback differed depending on the score given to the paper (Narciss & Huth, 2004). Findings from this study revealed that learners with low pass scores received less amount of assessment feedback than did pass and high pass learners (Narciss & Huth, 2004). Findings also revealed that there was a large discrepancy in the amount of feedback given to each learner (Narciss & Huth, 2004). One of the most extreme examples was on the amount of written feedback given by one teacher; one learner received a total of 210 comments while another received zero comments, even though both learners were taught by the same teacher and received the same grade (pass) (Narciss & Huth, 2004). The authors concluded that voluminous amount of written feedback or no feedback at all hinders learners learning as learners may not understand what to do to enhance their learning (Narciss & Huth, 2004).

From the above discussion, one may say that the amount of written feedback information appears to influence the effect that feedback has on learning (Swart et al., 2019). The amount of assessment feedback should not be overwhelming – Feedback should contain comments on important learning targets as opposed to voluminous comments that learners cannot absorb (Brookhart, 2008).

2.7.3. **The comprehensibility of assessment feedback**

Effective assessment feedback contains information that learners can comprehend (Brookhart, 2008). If learners cannot comprehend feedback information, then it is most likely that they will not use it (Brookhart, 2008). Literature revealed that effective feedback contains information that learners can comprehend – to ensure that they can identify where they are in their learning and what they need to do next to enhance their learning (Brookhart, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Case studies on formative assessment feedback revealed that learners' comprehensibility, or lack thereof, of assessment feedback has an impact on what they choose to do with feedback (Ene & Kosobucki; 2016; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). When learners comprehend assessment feedback, it is most likely that they will accept it and use it to enhance their learning (Ene & Kosobuski, 2016; Mao & Lee, 2020; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). However, lack of comprehensibility of assessment feedback contributes to the lack of engagement and retention of assessment feedback on the side of the learner (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010).

Learners cannot use something that is beyond their comprehension; therefore assessment feedback should take into consideration various factors (e. g: language; legibility of handwriting) that may hinder learners' comprehension of assessment feedback. The language that is used in providing learners with feedback on their assessment tasks can either enable or constrain learning (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001). A language that is too complex for learners can confuse or overwhelm them and a language that is too critical can cause students to struggle to comprehend how to improve (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001). Therefore, formative assessment should be provided in a language that learners can comprehend so that they can act upon it and use it to bridge the gap their learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2006).

This section has discussed some of the factors that influence the effectiveness of formative feedback. Drawing from the above reviewed literature, it may be said that the implementation of effective feedback requires consideration of enabling factors such as timing, amount, and comprehensibility of assessment feedback (Omer & Abdularhim, 2017). Although several scholars have established the benefits of giving learners

formative feedback that takes into account the above mentioned enabling factors, the thinking that shapes how learners understand and potentially use formative feedback remains unclear. It is therefore my goal in this study to demonstrate how learners experience, understand and potentially incorporate written feedback in their learning.

2.8. A REVIEW OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RECEIVING ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

Students' experiences of receiving feedback has been studied in various disciplines, however most of these studies focused on experiences of higher institutions students, with little research focusing on high school students. In this section, I will thematically review local and international literature about students' experiences of receiving written feedback in high school and in tertiary institutions.

2.8.1. Perceived relevance of written assessment feedback

The issue of students' perceived relevance of written feedback on written course work has been given great attention, specifically in tertiary institutions. A study that explored health science students' experiences of receiving written formative feedback revealed that students viewed this form of feedback as an essential tool to help them progress towards the goal of becoming independent life-long learners (Peacock et al., 2010). Participants in this study revealed that because written feedback is permanent, one can use it as a source of reference for their own independent learning (Peacock et al., 2010). In support of this, one participant in this study said, "Sometimes you can go back to it and … like say 'well how can I change that?'" (Peacock et al., 2010, p. 314). This suggests that written feedback is a relevant tool that can be used by students to work independently in preparing for future learning events (Peacock et al., 2010).

A similar study was conducted by the German Institute for International Educational Research, the University of Kassel, and the Leuphana University of Lüneburg. The study was conducted in 18 middle track schools, in Hesse, and included students' reflection on the relevance of Mathematics assessment feedback (Rakoczy, Pinger, Hochweber, Klieme, Schütze & Besser, 2018). Students' perceived relevance of formative assessment feedback was self-reported on a five-item scale. Students

indicated on a four-point scale ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 3 (completely agree) the extent to which formative feedback in the classroom helped them learn where and how they could improve (Rakoczy et al., 2018). Findings from the study revealed that most students perceived assessment feedback as a relevant tool that can help them recognize where they could improve (Rakoczy et al., 2018). The study also reported that such perception of formative assessment feedback enhanced students' self-efficacy regarding forthcoming assessment tasks. Students self-efficacy was self-reported on a four-item scale ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 3 (completely agree), in which students indicated that they believed they would succeed on the forthcoming assessment task (Rakoczy et al., 2018). The study concluded that students' self-efficacy was influenced by their perceived relevance of formative assessment feedback. Students who perceived formative feedback as a useful tool that provides suggestions for future academic improvement were reported to have greater self-efficacy than those who perceived who did not perceive feedback as useful (Rakoczy et al., 2018). This suggests that the perceived usefulness of formative feedback influences students' self-efficacy which then impact on their future learning and academic performance (Rakoczy et al., 2018).

Another study that explored students' experiences of receiving written feedback was conducted by Chidiebere (2015). The study explored students' experiences of information and communication technology (ICT) facilitated feedback at a University in Kwazulu-Natal (Chidiebere, 2015). Part of the findings in the study revealed that students viewed written feedback as an essential tool to enhance communication (Chidiebere, 2015). Participants in the study reported that written feedback increased communication amongst students and between students and lecturers (Chidiebere, 2015). This is because many students shared and talked with each other and with their lecturers about the written comments they received on their coursework, mostly to identify common misunderstandings of the content and for assistance with learning and understanding (Chidiebere, 2015). Although useful, Chidiebere's (2015) study did not provide a critical discussion of the interconnection between mark allocation and written comments in the analysis of students' experiences of receiving e-mail facilitated written feedback, thus ruling out a more nuanced discussion. A substantial amount of literature

revealed that students tend to focus on the mark allocated on their assessment task rather than on formative feedback (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Jones, et al., 2012; van der Kleij, 2019). It may therefore be said that the mark a student receives on their formative assessment has a direct impact on how he/she experiences feedback.

2.8.2. **Focus on mark-loss not on formative feedback**

Several key points emerged from literature on formative assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Jones, et al., 2012; van der Kleij, 2019. As mentioned above, one notable point came from the observation that written feedback in a form of a mark or grade has become the only thing that students pay attention to (Black & Wiliam, 2006). The issue of students' focus on mark loss rather than on formative feedback has been studied by a number of researchers. A study conducted in Australia on formative feedback practices in five schools revealed that most students were mainly interested in their marks and not on formative feedback complimenting the mark allocated (van der Kleij, 2019). When presented with an opportunity to resubmit written assessments, these students only did so to improve their assessment marks as opposed to showing better understanding of the assessed content knowledge (van der Kleij, 2019).

Similar findings were revealed in a study that explored students' initial reactions to the written feedback they receive on written coursework in three universities in Norwich (Jones et al., 2012). Part of the findings from the study revealed that students who received a lower mark (< 60%) were less content, thus less interested in learning than those who received middle (60-69%) to high mark (above 69%) (Jones et al., 2012). If the mark was lower than expected, students felt unhappy and less keen to learn. On the other hand, students whose mark was as expected or higher felt happy and were keener on learning. The essential message from the study was that a mark allocated on coursework was contributing factor on whether or not students use feedback to inform their learning (Jones et al., 2012). Another study that explored students' experiences of written feedback on coursework in a Chinese university revealed findings similar to Jones et al. (2012). Findings in the study revealed that students paid

particular attention to the mark allocated on written coursework. Students in this study reported that they felt unhappy and less motivated to learn when they received a mark lower than expected (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). In support of this, one student participant in the study commented: “I felt very disappointed about the score. I never got a score below 70” (Zhang & Hyland, 2018, p. 98). The student went on to indicate that, as a result of mark-loss, s/he felt demoralized to learn (Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

Although several studies have shown that students focused more on mark-loss rather than on formative feedback, on the contrary are the findings of the study presented by Alfehaid, Qotineha, Alsuhebanya, Alharbia and Almodaimegha Alfehaid (2018) and Hounsell et al. (2008). A study that explored the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate healthcare sciences students of feedback at a university in Saudi Arabia revealed that students valued written feedback more than marks allocated by the teacher (Alfehaid et al., 2018). Most students in the study reported that they did not focus on mark loss, but on written comments because these would help them enhance their learning (Alfehaid et al., 2018). Students also reported that they valued written comments over a final grade on their coursework because they believed that effective comments would tell them about their progress and how to proceed (Alfehaid et al., 2018). A similarly study revealed that 75% of the students participants preferred written feedback that involved more than grades and included comments about their academic progress (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008). Finding in the study also revealed that although students preferred written comments over grades, only 38% of teachers provided detailed written comments. For this reason, students in this study were dissatisfied with the scantiness of their feedback (Hounsell et al., 2008).

The findings discussed in this section show that several scholars have studied the issue of marks and written comments, noting that most students focus on the mark achieved and ignore the corresponding narrative comments. However, it seems that despite the large volume of research on the phenomenon, the factors that contribute to the use of feedback in this way remains unclear. Therefore, it is my goal in this study to unveil factors that influence how students choose to use formative feedback and how this subsequently impact on their learning.

2.8.3. **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). Literature has also pointed out that students often misunderstand written feedback that lacks specificity and that teachers tend to provide standardized feedback in a 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, 2010). A study conducted in Australia, in English and mathematics classrooms, revealed that students desired written feedback that specified achievement and how they could improve (van der Kleij, 2019). In support of this, one student participant commented that she wanted "written feedback that explain 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 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 individual 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, Harbaugh, De Roo, Biesterveld, Gauger, Dimick & Sandhu, 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). The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education incorporates leadership requirements into the 6 core competencies for medical education (Vu et al., 2020). Participants in the study reported that they desired feedback that was specific to their performance and provided suggestions for improvement. However, they reported that they received feedback that was too nonspecific to guide steps for improvement (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). Findings from the study also revealed that the written evaluations (feedback) did not focus on their leadership skills, even though effective leadership was still expected of them (Vu et al., 2020). The study participants cited a prioritization of clinical and technical learning over leadership development in medical education (Vu et al., 2020). The study concluded that feedback that lacks specificity is unlikely to support learning (Vu et al., 2020).

2.8.4. **Clarity of written feedback**

Feedback serves a central purpose of supporting students’ development of logical skills and self-regulatory capacities (Ngwenya & Maistry, 2012), thus it should be clear and understandable to the students. Studies have shown that most students’ received written feedback where the teacher underlined an error, circled an error, placed an error tally in the margin, or put a question mark, which left students confused and unaware of what they did wrong and how to proceed to improve their learning (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Jamalinesari, Rahimib, Gowharyb, Azizifar, 2014). Those studies have also indicated that such unclear written feedback may not address the issues that it intends to as it may be subject to misinterpretation by students (Jamalinesari et al., 2014). A study that tackled the issue of clarity of written feedback revealed that students desired clear feedback, as unclear feedback was subject to misinterpretations (van der Kleij, 2019). Findings from this study also revealed that students complained about unclear written feedback, and felt that it was not useful in improving learning (van der Kleij, 2019). In support of this, one student participant said, “…because teachers do not explain it well [written feedback], it is difficult for me to understand it and use it” (van der Kleij, 2019, p. 182). From this, one can deduce that the usefulness of written feedback is dependent is on the clarity of comments given to the learner.

Another study that tackled the issue of clarity of written feedback was conducted in two American universities and explored students’ experiences of receiving formative feedback on their first and second English formative assessment drafts (Sommers, 1982). Students participants in the study reported that they received feedback

comments that were simultaneously directed at editing and developing, which they found contradictory and confusing (Sommers, 1982). The participants in the study also reported that they received feedback comments that were expressed in the same way regardless of the particular text and consequently, they found these comments vague and hard to address (Sommers, 1982). The study concluded that unclear written feedback resulted in frustration on the side of the students (Sommers, 1982). Students did not know how to address comments they found unclear, and this made it even harder for them to use the feedback to improve their English writing skills (Sommers, 1982).

Similar findings were revealed in a study that explored the experiences of formative feedback of third year nursing students within a UK higher education setting (Duers & Brown, 2009). Participants in this qualitative study reported that they often received comments such as 'weak section' or 'work on this', which they found to be too vague and unhelpful (Duers & Brown, 2009). One participant who received such comments on their assessment commented; "What does that mean? What made the section weak? Why is the section weak? I am left wondering why." (Duers & Brown, 2009, p. 657). This study concluded that clarity is important; students need to understand the feedback comments they receive on their assessment tasks so that they can use it to enhance their learning (Duers & Brown, 2009).

2.8.5. **Valence of written feedback**

Giving written feedback that is both corrective (negative) and reinforcing (positive) is an essential part of the learning process (Brookhart, 2008). Given correctly, such written feedback can improve students' academic performance and enable them to develop an analytical approach to learning (Brookhart, 2008). Among the researchers who have considered the valence of written feedback on students' written formative assessment are Lee (2008), Zhang and Hyland (2018) and Gentrup, Lorenz, Kristen and Kogan (2020). Lee (2008) explored student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. Part of the study examined the valence of written feedback on students' English secondary language written assessments (Lee, 2008). Findings from this study revealed that low proficient students expressed a less positive attitude

towards written feedback that only addressed errors (Lee, 2008). These participants reported that such feedback did not appreciate their writing efforts, thus discouraged them from learning about their writing errors (Lee, 2008). Although students who were clarified as high proficient in the study preferred written feedback that addressed errors, the researcher cautioned against generalizing these findings and asserted that students' differential preference for feedback that addressed errors was dependent on proficiency level and motivation (Lee, 2008). The study concluded that students' proficiency level and motivation to develop writing skills had a direct influence on how they experienced error focused written feedback (Lee, 2008).

A similar study was conducted at a Chinese university (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Findings from the study revealed that students felt overwhelmed when written comments reveal more errors than appraisal for the good work done (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). One of the participants in the study stated that s/he felt helpless and anxious when written feedback addressed errors only and as a result, s/she rejected its validity (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Another participant commented: "I was taken aback by the detailed teacher feedback in my essay. I never received so much teacher-written feedback in the past two years. … The teacher pointed out all the article errors such as "a" and "the", and he provided corrected answers next to the wrong ones…Even abbreviation and number usage…I felt ashamed of some silly mistakes" (Zhang & Hyland, 2018, p.95). This suggests that students are most likely to be demotivated by negative written feedback, and this may constrain their academic improvement or motivation to learn.

Another study that considered the issue of valence of written feedback was that conducted by Gentrup, Lorenz, Kristen and Kogan (2020) in 64 classrooms in Germany primary schools. Findings from this study revealed that, on average, students received written feedback on their performance 23 times (Gentrup et al., 2020). Findings from this study also revealed that students whose performance was higher received more positive than negative feedback, while those whose performance was lower received more negative than positive feedback (Gentrup et al., 2020). Under-performing students reported that they felt demoralized by negative feedback, thus did not use it to improve

their learning. Higher and lower achieving students preferred positive comments that motivated them to do better in future assessment tasks (Gentrup et al., 2020).

Although, several studies have revealed that most students preferred positive than negative feedback, on the contrary are the findings of the study presented by Davies and Jacobs (2006). The data for this study was collected from 28 college students who were divided into four groups to deal with a problem-solving consensus exercise (Davies & Jacob, 2006). Afterwards the participants in this study received written feedback on sheets made up of positive and negative information in varying order. Findings from this study revealed that students prefer written feedback that contained both positive and negative comments (Davies & Jacob, 2006). A positive perception of written feedback containing both positive and negative comments was also confirmed by Parkes, Abercrombie and McCarty (2013). In their study, the teachers repeatedly gave written feedback to assignments written by medical students (Parkes et al., 2013). Findings from this study revealed that in general, the students considered written feedback containing both positive and negative comments more useful and efficacious (Parkes et al., 2013). The study concluded that feedback that did not combine both positive and negative comments lead to better performance in comparison with the one containing only positive or negative comments (Parkes et al., 2013).

The above discussed literature about the valence of written feedback has shown that while some students preferred positive over negative feedback, others preferred receiving positive comments alongside critical ones. The literature also revealed that the imbalance between positive and negative feedback was generally perceived as unhelpful (Davies & Jacobs, 2006; Parkes et al., 2013). Formative feedback should contain balance between positive and negative comments in order to make learners aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their work (Brookhart, 2008).

2.8.6. **Use of written feedback**

A substantial body of research on student use of written feedback exists in higher education (e.g., Carless, 2006; Rowe & Wood, 2008; Winstone et al., 2017), but only a limited number of research has been done in primary and secondary school contexts. Findings from research conducted in the school context revealed that student value

receiving written feedback and are aware of its benefits (Van der Kleij et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2014). However, research findings also reveal that students often report not using written feedback (Havnes et al., 2012). A study that explored students' use of written feedback in six Norwegian upper secondary schools revealed that a large group of students did not use written feedback (Havnes et al., 2012). Student participants in this study reported that they did not use written feedback because it was not integrated in future teaching and learning (Havnes et al. 2012). In support of this, one participant in the study explained what that "We do not really do anything with the feedback, we actually start on the next topic" (Havnes et al., 2012, p. 25). This suggests that students do not have systematic strategies for implementing written feedback in their future learning, thus will not use with it unless directed by the teacher (Havnes et al., 2012). It can therefore be said that an approach of increasing the use of formative feedback and is to conceptualize feedback more as dialogue rather than as information transmission (Nicol, 2010). Feedback as dialogue means that the student will not only get written feedback information but also has the opportunity to have discussion about that feedback afterwards (Nicol, 2010). In this circumstances, in order to make feedback more effective and valuable it should be understood by the student before it can be used to make productive improvements (Nicol, 2010).

Another study conducted on formative feedback practices revealed that students perceived teachers' poor handwriting as a barrier to using written feedback (van der Kleij, 2019). One student participant in this study reported: "Sometimes the teachers [*sic*] writing is messy so I can't read it so I don't end up reading it at all." (van der Kleij, 2019, p. 182). The issue of poor handwriting as a barrier to using written feedback was also found by Carless (2006). Carless' (2006) study, conducted in a Chinese tertiary education setting, revealed that student reported not using written feedback because they could not decipher their lecturers' handwriting, which cause frustrations. A similar study revealed that academic discourse, marking criteria terminology and lecturers' handwriting were poorly understood by students (Duers & Brown, 2009). One participant in this study reported commented: "at times, the written feedback can be confusing…The lecturer use big academic words that you don't know" (Duers & Brown, 2009, p. 657). Another study participant reported: "You cannot read their (lecturer)

comments…I had to ask someone who knew a particular lecturer's handwriting to decipher it for me" (Duers & Brown, 2009, p. 657). This study concluded that academic terminology is another barrier to using feedback, and recommended that lecturers should provide guidance on academic language and marking criteria (Duers & Brown, 2009).

Although several studies have revealed that most students do not use written feedback on written coursework, on the contrary are the findings of the study presented by van der Kleij (2019). The study was conducted in Australia and data was collected from 59 teachers and 186 students in secondary English and mathematics classes in five Australian schools (van der Kleij, 2019). Findings from the study revealed that most students used written feedback in both English and mathematics school subjects. Student participants in this study reported that they were eager to learn what they needed to do to improve their learning, thus used written feedback to revise their work and to improve their understanding of the content knowledge (van der Kleij, 2019). In support of this, one participant in this study said, "The written feedback that is given to me is usually very effective in helping me understand what is expected of me and where I can improve. It is also helpful in showing me areas in which I have done well" (van der Kleij, 2019, p. 182). The implication that can be drawn from this is that students who do use written feedback are those who recognize it as useful and are able to use it to improve their learning.

2.9. **IMPLICATION OF LITERATURE**

Students' experiences of receiving written feedback on written assessment has been studies across a number of disciplines, including mathematics, science, and languages. Such research has focused on higher education, with little research focusing on secondary school education. Findings from these studies revealed that students perceived written feedback that was timely, that suggested how to improve and specified achievement as most useful to their learning (Alfehaid et al., 2018; Havnes, et al., 2012; Peacock, et al., 2010; van der Kleij, 2019). In most instances, students reported that they received written feedback when it was no longer helpful to them. Other students complained about instances when they received written feedback that

lacked clarity and specificity, thus made it hard for them to use to inform their learning. Moreover, students reported that poor handwriting and unfamiliar academic terminology constrained them from using written feedback (Carless, 2006; Duers & Brown, 2009; van der Kleiji, 2019). Although there are challenges associated with written feedback, studies revealed that this mode of providing feedback is the most preferred and commonly used in South African classrooms (Mostert & Quinn, 2009; Iron, 2008; Naidoo, 2007).

Of significance is the lack of research on secondary school learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment, specifically in grade 10 Business Studies in the South African context. This gives relevance to my study as it attempts to address this gap. Most research on learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment stopped after the presentation of findings. This study continues after the discussion of findings to provide implications for future feedback practices and to make recommendations for future research.

2.10. **CONCLUSION**

This chapter reviewed the literature relevant to my study. The gaps identified from the reviewed literature gives relevance to my study. The following chapter discusses the theoretical framework that was employed in this study.

CHAPTER 2B

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, I provided a review of local and international literature relevant to this study. In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework that underpinned this study. A theoretical framework is defined as a way in which researchers report, question, and develop thoughts or theories on what possible answers could be (Creswell, 2012). A theoretical framework can influence how researchers design their study, how they collect and analyse the data for their study (Creswell, 2012). In this study, I adopted the social constructivism theory as a way of framing my study and as a way of deepening my analysis. This theoretical framework was chosen because it enabled me to understand how learners make meaning of written formative feedback and how they ultimately use it to construct new understanding of the content knowledge.

2.2. **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM THEORY**

The social constructivism theory evolved from the extensive study of cognitive development (e.g., how thinking and knowledge develops through social interactions in a socio-cultural context) by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory is based on John Piaget's idea of the child as an active learner (which is often attributed as the roots of constructivism) (Jones & Araje, 2002). However, while Piaget believed that cognitive development was a product of the mind "achieved through observation and experimentation, Vygotsky viewed it as a social process, achieved through interaction with more knowledgeable members of the culture" (Rummel, 2008, p. 80).

The social constructivism theory calls attention to the importance of culture and the value of the social context for cognitive development (Brown, 2008). This theory maintains that individuals construct their own reality as a result of active participation and social interactions with others in a socio-cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is therefore viewed as a social process which provides learners with opportunities to construct their own knowledge through interactions with a more knowledgeable other

(e.g: a teacher, a parent, a more knowledgeable peer) (Gredler, 2009; Selepe & Moll, 2016).

The social constructivism theory challenges the view that cognitive development is an individual process, and posits that it is rather a collaborative effort (Martinez, 2010). Even though the theory acknowledges individual psychology in cognitive development, it shifts the focus to external forces that are entwined with the internal world (Martinez, 2010). These influences, outside of the self, have a crucial function, “serving to shape how humans view the world, through the language they come in contact with and the personal reflection that is derived from that input” (Martinez, 2010, p. 3). Perhaps the most well-known assumption of the social constructivism theory is that learning is a social process which is activated through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Gredler, 2009). The ZPD is defined as the ‘distance’ between the already established cognitive structures of a learner (the ‘actual developmental level’) and the structured thought constituted in the learner’s activity under the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (the ‘potential developmental level’) (Selepe & Moll, 2016). The ZPD recognizes that "individuals often display greater levels of skill through the help, encouragement, and training of others" (Martinez, 2010, p. 14). With the help of parents, teachers, and others who are somewhat highly developed, learners can enhance their potential in any particular area of knowledge to a more advanced level (Martinez, 2010; Selepe & Moll, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). With a small amount of support, the learner can succeed in completing selected tasks that may present challenges beyond his/her competence (Martinez, 2010).

The social constructivism theory puts emphasis on dialogue, thus maintains that learning is primarily a social product yielded by the processes of conversation, discussion and negotiation (Woo & Reeves, 2007). Classroom instruction that adopts the social constructivism theory provides learners with cognitive tools for continued development and involves learners in interactive and collaborative activities that promote and facilitate learning (Martinez, 2010). However, the teacher does not simply stand by and watch the learners explore and discover (Gredler, 2009). Instead, the teacher guides the learners when faced with problems, encourage them to work as

groups to think about issues and questions, and support them with confidence-building appreciation and advice when dealing with confusing activities and embedded challenges (Martinez, 2010). This reflects a social constructivist view that appropriate amount of guidance from the teacher is needed in order to help learners move progressively towards higher mental processes and towards greater independence in the learning process (Mayer, 2004).

Interaction between the teacher and learners is fundamental to this theory and the teacher's actions in the classroom should always support learners to proceed through Zones of Proximal Development (Thurlings, Vermeulen, Bastiaens & Stijnen, 2012). In this regard, formative assessment feedback is viewed as interactive process between the teacher and learners which guide learners to the next stage of development in which outcomes are achieved (Thurlings et al., 2012). Social constructivism suggests that effective formative feedback guides learners towards internal reality, facilitates knowledge construction, helping to build symbols, and is given in the context of human experience; gives general, mental construction 'tool kits', and the meaning within feedback message is determined by internal understanding (Mory, 2003; Thurlings et al., 2012). Drawing from this view of formative feedback, it may be said that understanding how learners receive formative feedback on school assessment is crucial as it may help one deliver feedback that learners can understand and that learners can act upon to construct new knowledge (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Orsmond and Merry, 2011).

2.3. **WHY THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM THEORY**

In this study, I drew from the social constructivism theory to explore learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment. As mentioned above, social constructivism theory maintains that an individual plays an active role in building and making sense of information (Vygotsky, 1978; Martinez, 2010). Based on this social constructivist perspective, this study explored how learners make sense of written feedback on written formative assessment, and how they ultimately use it to construct knowledge, thereby enhancing their own learning of Business Education.

Social constructivists view formative assessment as an interactive process between the teacher and the learner (Sardareha & Saadb, 2012). Formative assessment involves feedback for the teacher and the learner. The teacher receives formative assessment feedback to assess the learner's learning and to inform his/her instructional practices (Sardareha & Saadb, 2012). The teacher then communicates formative feedback to learners to help them identify where they are in their learning in relation to where they are supposed to be (Sardareha & Saadb, 2012). Taking into consideration that interaction between the teacher and the learner is an essential ingredient in the learning processes, this study explored how learners receive and use written formative feedback, as an interaction tool, to inform their own learning.

From the social constructivism theory, feedback is viewed as any information about the gap between the actual level and the potential level of development, which is used to alter the gap in some way (Ramaprasad, 1983). For learners to move from their actual to their potential level of development, teachers should provide effective formative feedback (Brookhart, 2008). Effective formative feedback is a crucial source of reference which learners can use to progress to the next step in their learning (Brookhart, 2008). This study explored learners' experiences of receiving written feedback in order to understand whether or not Business Studies learners use feedback to move from their actual to their potential cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, this learning theory suggests that learners should be given an opportunity to respond to feedback and engage in a dialogue with their teacher about the feedback they have received (Auld et al., 2010; Hyland, 2001, Landry et al., 2009; Nicol and McFarlane-Dick, 2006). Dialogue about formative feedback is intended to help learners understand the feedback they received so that they can be able to use it to improve their own learning (Thurlings et al., 2012). Therefore, this study explored how learners receive and use formative assessment feedback, as well as why they use it the way they do in their learning process.

2.4. **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I discussed the theoretical framework that I used to view the research problem and orient my study. To explore learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on Grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment, I employed the social constructivism theoretical framework as discussed above. In the next chapter, I will describe and discuss the research design and methodology that have been applied to this study.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1. **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, the review of the literature on assessment feedback was outlined. The review focused on the meaning and purpose of formative assessment, formative assessment in Business Studies, definition and purpose of assessment feedback, modes of assessment feedback, factors influencing the effectiveness of assessment feedback as well as local and international literature relating to students' experiences of receiving formative assessment feedback across different disciplines. The theoretical framework that was used to view the research problem and orient the study was also presented. This chapter outlines the research methodology including the basis for data production and the approach to data analysis. In this chapter, I firstly outline the philosophical and methodological positioning in general; and more specifically, the case study approach that was used to explore grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback. Thereafter, I provide a description of the research context, the sampling strategy and data generation methods that were employed in the study. Next, I discuss the process of data analysis to make meaning of learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback, how learners use written formative feedback and why they use it the way they do. I then outline the appropriate and necessary considerations of the research by taking account of issues of trustworthiness and ethics. Finally, methodological limitations are considered.

3.2. **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The logic through which a researcher addresses the design of a research study is called research methodology. Taylor, Bogdan and De Vault (2016) see methodology as the manner in which a researcher approaches a research problem and ways in which he/she pursue the answers to a research problem. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), methodology refers to the theoretical perspective or lens through which

researchers see the social world. Consequently, methodology is seen as the bridge between a philosophical viewpoint and the methods used in a study. This study explored learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment and how they use formative feedback to inform their learning. I aimed to understand this phenomenon through personal interaction with and perceptions of the study participants. As such, a qualitative approach was most suitable for this study. In the next section, I discuss qualitative research and its usefulness for my study.

3.3. **QUALITATIVE STUDY**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach is concerned with unveiling aspects of social life through generating words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In other words, the search for meaning is central to qualitative researchers. The aim in a qualitative approach is to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspective as they make meaning of their world. I chose to approach this study from a qualitative perspective because this research approach enabled me to provide a rich descriptive data and an in-depth description of the study participants' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

A qualitative methodology may be used when a researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of a research topic (Bryman & Bell, 2007). I was specifically interested in understanding how Business Studies learners use formative feedback to inform their learning and why they use formative feedback in the way in which they do. A qualitative approach was suitable for my study as the focus was on participants' multiple experiences of receiving written formative assessment feedback. This qualitative study thus explored several critical issues relating to how grade 10 Business Studies learners' receive and subsequently utilize written formative feedback, according to the following six sub-themes: timing, specificity, valence and clarity of written formative feedback, focus on mark and not on learning from written formative feedback and self-regulated learning.

3.4. **RESEARCH PARADIGM**

The term paradigm originated from the Greek word *paradeigma* which means to represent something or offer it as a model (Pillay, 2013). Shuttleworth (2008) defines a paradigm as a dominant way of thinking and doing things that involves shared expectations and rules. Neuman (2006) adds by stating that a paradigm establishes the justification for one's research, relates values to research and guides ethical behaviour.

Paradigms thus serve as lenses or organizing principles by which reality is interpreted (Pillay, 2013). This study is founded in the interpretive paradigm, developed from interpretivism theory. The interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the subjective world of human experience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). It maintains that in order to understand human actions, one should see the world through the eyes of the actor doing the action rather than through the use of scientific methods (Collins, 2010). Interpretive paradigm is rooted in the belief that human beings make meaning of the world through the social interactions they have with others, within their specific context. Furthermore, interpretive paradigm assumes that human beings actively construct their own knowledge; they create and associate their subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, an interpretive researcher's effort is to develop an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through the eyes of the participants (De Vos, Delport, Fouché & Strydo, 2005).

I chose to locate this study in the interpretive paradigm because I sought to understand learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment from the subjective experiences of each participant (De Vos et al., 2005). Neuman (2000) asserts that a researcher in the interpretivist orientation is concerned with the participants' perceptions of what is important or meaningful to them. In this study, I was concerned with learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback. Thus, by using this orientation, I grappled with and probed some of the complexities and issues of written formative assessment feedback as experienced by grade 10 Business Studies learners.

3.5. **CASE STUDY APPROACH**

In this study, I made use of a qualitative case study approach to answer my research questions. A qualitative research designs include conceptual studies, historical research, action research, case study research, ethnography and grounded theory (Maree, 2007). Within a qualitative framework, I found the case study most appropriate for this study. The reason for this is that a qualitative case study is characterized by "detailed description of situations, events, people [and] interactions from people about their experiences, attitudes and thoughts" (Patton, 1980, p.20) about a situation. Henning, van Rensburg and Smit (2004) argue that the processes informing the case; that is: "a description of how, where, when and why things happen" (emphasis in original) are a vital part of the research too (p. 41). Therefore, in this study, the case study approach provided a strategy which helped me, as a researcher, to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning for those involved. The case study design was suitable for this study, because it held promise for providing a more complex and complete picture of educational practice and its consequences. A case study approach articulated well with the intention and purpose of my study, which was to explore Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in two public secondary schools in Gauteng. A case study research design was favorable to this study because it afforded me an opportunity to engage closely with the study participants so that I could develop deep insights into their experiences and thoughts about written formative assessment feedback (Patton, 1980). The importance of adopting a case study approach in this study was to enable me to yield in-depth information needed for this study which would not be possible to achieve through another type of scientific method (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

While case studies may be credited with providing contextually rich information (Merriam, 2009), they may be criticized for the use of a single case study. However, the use of a single case study in qualitative research does not diminish the quantity or quality of the data that may be gathered (Creswell, 2010). Furthermore, in conducting qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) remind the reader that findings are not sought to make generalizable assumptions but rather to

obtain an in-depth rich understanding of people and their interactions, in a particular context. This was relevant to my study as it was directly in line with my quest to explore and present 'rich', logical and useful data from a small number of research participants within a particular context. In the context of my study, I did not aim to obtain information that was generalizable, but instead I aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback. Additionally, using a case study methodology addresses important questions regarding educational practices, of what works and what does not, and can add to a body of research and to theoretical understandings of teaching and learning grounded in specific contexts (Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, given the nature of my research, I believe that my qualitative case study inquiry with its interpretivist orientation was appropriate for understanding 12 grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on written formative assessment in the context of two public secondary schools.

3.6. **RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design is like a plan or strategy and refers to a comprehensive outline of an examined study (Maree, 2007). It is the way in which the research is conceptualized and how the findings are eventually put together (Maree, 2007). A research design is a kind of 'blue-print' of the study that focuses on planning process, the end product and on the aim of the results. In the sections that follow, I discuss the research context, sampling and the data generation methods that were used in the design of my research (Maree, 2007).

3.6.1 **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The study was conducted in South Africa, in the Gauteng province. As in many other countries (van der Kleij, 2019), formative assessment, in which formative feedback plays a critical role, is a clear policy expectation for South African teachers' classroom practice (National Protocol for Assessment [NPA], 2012). Formative feedback is also regarded as crucial in the learning process (Clark, 2012; Stobart & Gipps, 2010). The study reports on 12 grade 10 learners' experiences of receiving written formative

feedback from two public secondary schools located in Johannesburg East. The two secondary schools are located in a suburb, with electricity and good network coverage in and around the schools. Both schools offer free internet access to their learners. This was favorable for my study as the research was conducted through technology-mediated communication, which required the study participants to have internet access or mobile data. Furthermore, the study focused on formative feedback experiences of Business Studies learners. This subject was chosen because it was identified as an essential area of learning and recognized as underpinning learning in other commercial subject areas: Accounting and Economics (Russell, 2009).

3.6.2. **SAMPLING**

In research, it is of great importance to select your sample in a systematic way to ensure that users of your research data see a credible sample (Sarantakos, 2005). Sampling is defined as a step which the researcher takes to select the people, settings, materials and events that will be studied (Sarantakos, 2005). This study employed purposive and convenience sampling approaches. Henning (2007) describes purposive approach as sampling which “looks for factors which fit the criteria of desirable” (p. 71). The purposive sampling approach is used when samples are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics that will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central questions that the researcher intends to study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). With the help of the grade 10 Business Studies teachers, I selected the participants for this study based on their “typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought” (Cohen et al., 2007). The study participants where purposively selected according to their grade 10 Business Studies term 1 and 2 academic performances. Six learners in each of the 2 schools were selected according to the following categories; lower (<39%), middle (40-69%) and higher (above 69%) academic performance. This was done to ensure that data was collected from learners with varying academic performance in order to get a holistic understanding of learners’ experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) state that in order to gain access to the research space, more personalized requests will have a greater impact and a more committed response

from possible participants. It must be noted that prior to following up the above selection method, I obtained permission to conduct research from the Gauteng Department of Education (DoE). The approval letter that I received from the DoE allowed me access to the two secondary schools; however I could not visit the schools due to the closure of public schools in order to reduce the spread of Coronavirus-19. For this reason, I used technology-mediated communication such as emails and phone calls to communicate with the respective principals and teachers. To purposively select the study participants, I sent an email to the respective schools' principals from whom I received permission to invite learners to participate in my study and recommendations of grade 10 Business Studies teachers who could help me 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 as noted above. Following the selection process, I spoke to the participants through a WhatsApp group voice call for 30 minutes about the purpose of my study and to seek their opinion and probe their willingness to participate in the study. I did this to ensure that the class teacher and I, did not in any way coerce learners into participation, hence affording learners the informed option to participate in the study or not. Further to this, as shall be discussed under the ethical considerations , the participating learners were sent a consent form, through email, to complete as an indication of their willingness to participate and to inform them of the opportunity to still change their minds about participating in the research.

This study also used convenience sampling approach as was intentionally limited to Business Studies learners in two public secondary schools in Johannesburg East, Gauteng. Remler and Ryzin (2014) define convenience sampling as a method of selecting research participants based on their availability and accessibility. Cohen et al. (2011) adds that one advantage of this type of sampling is that data can be generated quickly as the researcher would have chosen nearest individuals as participants in a study. I chose grade 10 Business Studies learners in two public secondary schools in Gauteng as participants because I considered them as convenient sources for the following points below:

- I have taught learners from school A for 3 consecutive years and I believe I have built a good professional relationship with them, thus they are most likely to feel comfortable talking about their experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment with me.
- I offer extra Accounting lessons to learners from both schools, therefore this gave me an opportunity to have access to them conveniently. I offer extra lessons to learners from school A during the week (after school hours) and learners from school B on Saturdays.
- These learners have access to mobile devices and internet connection within the conveniently selected schools' premises, so I was able to collect data through WhatsApp and Microsoft teams.

In this study, I adopted purposive and convenience sampling because these approaches enabled me to generate useful and valuable data from the targeted population sample. In this study, I explored learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment, therefore I decided to purposively and conveniently select participants who have varying Business Studies academic performance, who were willing to participate in the study and who were easily accessible to me. To ensure that the teacher-learner relationship I have with the participants did not affect the study, especially in relation to voluntary participation, I emailed assent and consent forms as well as information sheets to learners and their parents, which informed them that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they chose to, without any disadvantages or penalties. This helped me ascertain that leaners in this study were not in any way coerced learners into participation.

3.6.3. **DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLED POPULATION**

The data of this study was generated from grade 10 Business Studies learners from two public secondary schools in Johannesburg, in the Gauteng province. The study participants were twelve in number, six from each school, and they were purposively

sampled according to their academic performance as well as conveniently sampled according to accessibility and willingness to participate.

The data generated in this study came from the sample of learner participants indicated below (see table 3.6.3.1 and table 3.6.3.2).

Group A from School A

NAME	AGE	GRADE	SUBJECT
Learner A	16	10	Business Studies
Learner B	16	10	Business Studies
Learner C	16	10	Business Studies
Learner D	16	10	Business Studies
Learner E	16	10	Business Studies
Learner F	16	10	Business Studies

Table 3.6.3.1: Learner participants' information

Group B from School B

NAME	AGE	GRADE	SUBJECT
Learner G	16	10	Business Studies
Learner H	16	10	Business Studies
Learner I	16	10	Business Studies
Learner J	17	10	Business Studies

Learner K	16	10	Business Studies
Learner L	16	10	Business Studies

Table 3.6.3.2: Learner participants' information

3.7. **DATA GENERATION METHODS**

Merriam (2009) sees data as regular portions of information found in the sites chosen. Different types of data generation methods are characterized with qualitative data; for example, documentation, observation, focus groups and interviews. The researcher sets the stage for the generation of data and delineates the boundaries for data generation (Creswell, 2014). For this study, I found semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp and focus group interviews through Microsoft (MS) Teams most suitable.

This 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 (Segars, Katler, McQueen, Kotlyar, Glenn, Knight, Feinberg, Taylor, Toner & Kawwas, 2020). The virus is primarily spread between people during close contact, often via small droplets produced by coughing, sneezing, or talking. To reduce the spread of this virus, the South African government has put in place preventive measures including staying at home, avoiding crowded places, and keeping distance from others (Segars et al., 2019). This global pandemic had a direct influence on how I chose to collect data for this study. Initially, I had chosen to conduct face-to-face semi-structure and focus group interviews. However, following the Covid-19 directives of social distancing and avoiding crowded places, I decided to employ the following data generation methods:

- Semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp
- Focus group interviews through Microsoft (MS) Teams

Interviews are methods of data generation through oral quiz using a set of preplanned core questions. Interviews can be very productive since the interviewer can pursue specific issues of concern that may lead to focused and constructive suggestions (Creswell, 2012). An interview methodology assumes that interviews usually involve

conversation with a purpose (Creswell, 2012). This means that the interviewer must use key objectives to stimulate the interviewee to talk about particular aspects, while he/she listens carefully to what is being said, including how it is being said. In this way, the interviewer is able to interpret and obtain clarity, where necessary, on what has been said (Mason, 2002).

3.7.1. **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS THROUGH WHATSAPP**

A semi-structured interview has features of both structured and unstructured interviews and therefore uses both closed and open questions (De Vos, Delport, Fouché & Strydo, 2005). As a result, it has the advantage of both methods of interviews. In order to be consistent with all participants, the interviewer has a set of pre-planned core questions for guidance so that the same areas are covered with each interviewee (De Vos et al., 2005). As the interview progresses, the interviewee is given an opportunity to elaborate or provide more relevant information if he/she opts to do so (Creswell, 2012).

In this study, I employed semi-structured interview as a method to generate data about learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on Business Studies written formative assessment. I conducted semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp voice calls. Among all social networking services, WhatsApp is popularly chosen to be the primary means of communication method as young people move away from in-person interaction to multi-modal communication on smartphones (Quan-Haase, 2008, Schwarz, 2011). As a means of sending and receiving messages to and from individuals or groups, WhatsApp includes a variety of functions, such as text messages, attached images, audio files, video files, and links to web addresses (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). WhatsApp also allows users to make voice and video calls at a lower cost compared to normal carrier calls (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). A Semi-structured interview conducted through a WhatsApp voice call is a relatively new phenomenon, specifically as a method of data generation for research purposes, however this method allows researchers to generate rich data that is suitable for qualitative analysis (Gibson, 2020). This is because this method of data generation allows for the development of rapports necessary for participants to share their knowledge and experiences (Gibson, 2020). Researchers have also noted a number of practical advantages to WhatsApp

voice call interviews, including the reduced cost of conducting research, minimization of travel time to interviews and improved access to participants who might not want to, or be able to, take part in face-to-face interviews (Gibson, 2020).

With semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp voice calls as my data generation and participant interaction tool, I conducted a qualitative case study on grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment. This data generation method was most suitable for my study because it help me 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 (Madell and Muncer, 2007; Gibson, 2020). Semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp voice calls allowed for flowing discussions, and helped me obtain detained information about the studied phenomenon.

For the purpose of this study twelve participants, six from each school, were interviewed for thirty minutes each. The semi-structured interviews took a form of a friendly chat via WhatsApp voice calls, while trying to piece together different parts of the stories into a cohesive meaning (Shakedi, 2012). I 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. This allowed the participants to voice issues and questions that I would not have thought of. The interview questions focused on learners' experiences of receiving written feedback in relation timing, clarity, specificity, valence of written feedback, learners' use of written

feedback and challenges of using written feedback (See Appendix A for the semi-structured interview schedule).

When conducting WhatsApp semi-structured interviews, I kept in mind issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview I assured each participant that their responses to the interview questions will be anonymous and that the information they will share with me will be held securely and will not be disclosed to anyone else. This helped build trust between myself and the study participants, thus the participants were free and expressive during the WhatsApp interviews. The participants were briefed on the content of the interview. They also granted me permission to tape-record the interviews. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts of interviews were returned to participants so that they could assess for clarity and peruse my interpretation of interview transcripts, to check that I had not misinterpreted or incorrectly cited what they had dialogued, in a particular context. Once the semi-structured interviews were conducted, I conducted a focus group interview through Microsoft Teams.

3.7.2. **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW THROUGH MICROSOFT TEAMS**

A focus group interview refers to a discussion, in which an interviewer asks a set of open-ended questions to a small group of target population (Zhu, Lucas, Becerik-Gerber & Southers, 2020). The name is derived from the fact that the selected groups are “focused” on a given topic (Zhu et al., 2020). Therefore, the selection criteria for participants in focus group interviews include: having domain knowledge on the topic, being within the age-range, and comfortable talking to the interviewer and other participants (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Compared to individual interviews, the main advantage of focus group interviews lies in that the group could foster a synergy, which results in more than the sum of each individual's output (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001; Zhu et al., 2020).

I employed focus group interview as a second method to generate data about Business Studies learners’ experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment. I conducted the focus group interview through MS Teams. MS Teams is a

cloud-based product available in Trinity's Office 365 (Koeningsbauer, 2017). MS Teams offer a researcher a number of interview options, including audio only, video with no audio, audio and video as well as audio, video and an automated Live Caption rendering of speech to text on the screen in real time (Koeningsbauer, 2017). For this study, I found focus group interview through MS teams audio and video most suitable. I chose MS Teams audio and video group interview as a data generation method because it resembled a face-to-face interview and allowed for visual cues and facial expressions (Koeningsbauer, 2017).

Unlike WhatsApp, MS Teams is not a popular method of communication, specifically among secondary school learners. Therefore, prior to conducting the focus group interview, I asked the participants to install the MS Teams app on their smartphone devices (and/or laptops). I then created a team and added the participants to the team as "members". When conducting MS Teams focus group interview, I kept in mind issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality and anonymity could not be guaranteed in the focus group interview; therefore before I began the interview, I asked participants to sign a digital agreement, stating that they would not repeat what was discussed during the interview outside the focus group.

A focus group interview using Microsoft audio and video calling between the study participants and I was conducted in a period when there were restrictions and limitations for the number of people that could gather in one place – this was one of the directives to prevent the spread of the Covid-19. With focus group interview through MS Teams as my data generation and participant interaction tool, I conducted a qualitative case study on grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment. This data generation method was most suitable for my study because it enabled me to widen the range of responses from the participants and to activate forgotten experiences that were not mentioned in the WhatsApp semi-structured interviews (e.g. what participants viewed as important between marks and corresponding written comments), thus enhancing the depth of my research data. This data generation method also enabled me to establish an online emotional connection with my study participants that was difficult to achieve in the WhatsApp semi-structured

interviews because of the absence of visual cues (Gibson, 2020). Moreover, focus group interview via Microsoft Teams was most suitable for my study because it allowed for flowing discussion, in which I allowed the interview to unfold as the participants talked. I only stopped the conversation if I felt that they were being repetitive or veering off the topic.

For the purpose of this study all twelve participants, six from each school, were interviewed for 90 minutes. The focus group interview took a form of a friendly chat via MS Teams audio and video call. An interview guide was developed to direct the focus group interview. Following the suggestion in Gibson (2020), the guide consisted of four parts. The first part covered the beginning of the interview, including a welcome message, explanation of the interview purpose and use of data, obtainment of participants' verbal consent to participate in the study and be recorded, and self-introduction of the study participants (Gibson, 2020). In the second part, I asked the participants a warm-up question: “How would you define formative assessment feedback?” The purpose of this question was to motivate the study participants to share their understanding of formative assessment feedback before they could discuss their experiences of receiving formative assessment feedback. Subsequently, the third part contained a series of questions to further provoke participants’ thoughts on the studied phenomenon (Gibson, 2020). The purpose of these questions was to create a discussion about the participants’ experiences of receiving written formative assessment feedback (see Appendix B for the focus-group interview schedule). It is important to note that while the questions listed in Appendix B acted as guidance for the focus group interview, they were not asked exactly in the order in which they are presented (Gibson, 2020). Some questions were raised and discussed among the participants before I could ask them. Finally, the last part of the focus group interview included summarizing the discussion and thanking the participants for their contribution to the study.

For the relevance of this study, semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp and a focus group interview through MS Teams were chosen as data generation methods

because of the advantages that they provided. The table below provides a layout of the procedures that I used to generate the data.

DATE	ITEM	ACTION	DATE COMPLETED
	DoE consent form	Sent the consent form to DoE	
16 June 2020	Information sheet and consent letters to principals	Sent information sheet and consent letter to school principals for permission to conduct research	23 June 2020
24 June 2020	Information sheet and consent letters to teachers	Sent information sheet and consent letter to teachers, asked for contact details of potential study participants	30 June 2020
06 July 2020	Information sheets and consent learners and parents – with interview dates	Sent information sheet and consent letter to learners and their parents	10 July 2020
20 July 2020	Information sheets and consent learners and parents	Received written consent from the study participants to participate in my study	31 July 2020

03 August 2020	Interviews	Prepared for interviews	07 August 2020
10 August 2020	Interviews	Conducted interviews	31 August 2020
07 September 2020	Interviews	Analyzed data	30 October 2020

Table 3.7.2.1: Procedures used to generate the data

Both data generation methods required the study participants to use mobile devices and mobile data. Through participants' information sheets, I informed the study participants that they would be responsible for any mobile data costs they incurred as a result of their participation in the study. Participants who did not have access to data were interviewed after the schools were reopened, so they stayed in the school's premises after school on the day scheduled for their interview so that they could connect to the school's Wi-Fi. In instances where the study participants or myself experienced challenges with internet connection, the interview was stopped and scheduled for another day. Participation in this study was voluntary, thus only learners who were available and willing to participate participated in the study.

3.8. **METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS**

One common form of data analysis in qualitative research is Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Smith and Firth (2011) describe TA as an interpretive process, whereby the researcher systematically searches through data to identify patterns, with the aim to describe the phenomenon under investigation. As this study adopted an interpretivist approach, TA was a suitable method to identify key themes and address the research questions. Scholars like Braun and Clarke (2006); McMillian and Schumacher (1997); and Remler and Ryzin (2014) have argued that thematic data analysis is a method of analyzing data in relation to themes that emerged from the data collected. It is a "qualitative research method for identifying,

analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) and has been used widely, including in assessment feedback analysis (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). TA is essentially an iterative, qualitative method for reviewing data that aims toward increased abstraction (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It starts with a row-by-row coding process, and the outcome is a set of themes that describe the phenomenon and their relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA goes beyond counting words in a text (content analysis) into exploring explicit and implicit meanings within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, I adopted Braun and Clarke's *Six Phases of Thematic Analysis* technique to analyse data generated from semi-structure and focus group interviews.

3.8.1. **PHASE 1: BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE DATA**

After collecting the data through semi-structured and focus group interviews, I immersed myself in the data. I transcribed the interview sessions of each participant and of the focus group, I reread the transcripts at least twice to begin to identify patterns and meaning, taking notes as I went along (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I transcribed the data from audio recorded data to written form.

3.8.2. **PHASE 2: CODE GENERATION**

Generating initial codes is a process of "coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This phase was focused on reducing the data and the production of initial codes (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was coded into "meaningful and manageable chunks of text, such as passages, quotations, single words..." (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 391). This phase was focused on the development of themes; it is the first and most basic level of analysis that is used as an organizational tool (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.8.3. **PHASE 3: THEMES GENERATION**

"Searching for themes, collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In this phase, I analyzed and

sorted the codes to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase was used as the draft of theme development and code placement.

3.8.4. **PHASE 4: REVIEWING THEMES**

Reviewing themes, checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This phase was focused on refining the draft themes identified in phase three using a two-level analysis of the codes. The first level involved reading through the codes for each theme and determining if a coherent pattern has developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If a coherent pattern was identified, I moved on to the second level of analysis, if codes did not fit, I had to determine if the theme itself was the issue or the codes and information for that specific theme. To complete the second level analysis, I read through the entire data set to ensure the themes fit in relation to the data. This also gave me the opportunity to check if I missed any additional data that needed to be coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.8.5. **PHASE 5: DEFINING AND NAMING THEMES**

"Defining and naming themes, ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definition and names for each theme" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The goal of this phase was to be able to "...clearly define what your themes are and what they are not" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). To meet this goal, I focused on defining each theme, identifying the essence of the theme and determining what aspect of the data and research questions the theme fits under (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes that emerged from the data collected are listed in the table below:

LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF RECEIVING WRITTEN FORMATIVE FEEDBACK
Timing of written formative feedback
Specificity of written formative feedback

Valence of written formative feedback
Clarity of written formative feedback
LEARNERS' USE OF WRITTEN FORMATIVE FEEDBACK
Focus on mark not on learning from written formative feedback
Self-regulated learning

Table 3.8.5.1: Themes generated from data collected

3.8.6. **PHASE 6: PRODUCING THE REPORT**

Producing the report is the final opportunity for analysis – "Selection of vivid, completing extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In this final phase I analyzed the data and wrote a narrative about the data that went beyond description of the data, and made an argument in relation to my research questions. This phase helped me provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell within and across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.9. **TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Trustworthiness is a term used in qualitative research to measure the degree to which the data generated from a study is believable (Creswell, 2009). In research, data may be trusted if there is evidence of how it was collected and how conclusions were reached. Guba and Lincoln (1981) explain that qualitative research does not usually require standardized instruments to check the trustworthiness of the data. This is because qualitative research usually uses smaller and non-random samples (Creswell, 2009). However, Creswell (1998) suggest that the trustworthiness of qualitative research can be established by using four strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

3.9.1. **CREDIBILITY**

Credibility refers to an evaluation of whether or not data production and data analysis are believable and trustworthy (De Vos et al., 2005). According to De Vos at al. (2005), credibility is parallel to internal validity- the analysis of whether or not the findings are equivalent to the reality. This study is rooted in the interpretive paradigm which operates with the assumption that there is no single reality (Shuttleworth, 2008). This is because each individual construct his/her own reality, based on the meaning they construct in a particular context (Shuttleworth, 2008). However, to address the issue of credibility in this study, I used two different data production methods (semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp and focus group interview via MS Teams) and provided a clear outline of how I analyzed the data. The use of two methods of data generation, instead of one, enabled me to develop deep knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

Furthermore, the trustworthiness of data collected through WhatsApp and MS teams could be questioned. Therefore, to ensure the trustworthiness of data in this study I employed the iterative questioning strategy (Shenton, 2004). During the interviews, I used probes to elicit detailed data and iterative questioning in which I returned to previously raised information and rephrased questions in order to detect falsehood of information that was previously provided and/or difference between new and old information. Fortunately, the interviews elicited the same data, even in cases where questions where rephrased to detect suspect data.

To further enhance the credibility of my study I discussed the findings and analysis of the data with my supervisors who helped me link the data produced from the study with the literature that was reviewed in chapter 2. In addition, after I had transcribed the data from audio recorded data to written form, I sent it back to the participants via WhatsApp so that they could check if the written form data was the exact reflection of what they said during the interviews. This kept me from being biased and from including my personal views in the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

3.9.2. **TRANSFERABILITY**

Transferability refers to an evaluation of whether or not the findings of a study can be generalized (Shenton, 2004). In other words, transferability is a degree to which a particular situation can be directly extended to the phenomenon being studied (Shenton, 2004). My intention was never to transfer the knowledge to other contexts, but rather to explore grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative assessment feedback. Therefore I made use of social constructivist theory to layer my understandings of the learners experiences of written formative assessment feedback in order to make my findings credible and transferable. In addition, I enhanced transferability by providing in-depth details of the research methods, contexts, and assumptions underlying the study. I did this to ensure that the reader of this study can have enough information to judge whether or not the findings in this study are applicable to other contexts they may know (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, to address the issue of transferability in this study I discussed the literature related to learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on formative assessment in various disciplines. I also provided details of the theoretical framework that underpins this study. This information will be useful for a reader who is interested in applying the outcomes of this study in other situations (Shenton, 2004).

3.9.3. **DEPENDABILITY**

Dependability is similar to reliability, and it refers to an evaluation of whether or not research findings can be the same under similar circumstances (De Vos et al., 2005). This study acknowledges that reliability may be problematic as the study participants are humans and human behaviour can be influenced by various factors. However, to address the issue of dependability in this study, the following techniques, adopted from Merriam (1998), were applied:

- I explained the research paradigm which underpins this study, which is the interpretivism theory.
- I used multiple data generation methods, which are semi-structured and focus group interviews.

- I explained the data analysis method, which is Thematic Analysis adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.9.4. **CONFORMABILITY**

Conformability refers to the extent to which the findings of a research can be corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Shenton (2004) adds that the issue of conformability is linked to objectivity – the degree to which the researcher is aware of individual subjectivity or bias. To address the issue of conformability in this study, the following techniques, adopted from Khanare (2009, p. 40), were applied:

- Having someone to critically question one's interpretation.
- Developing themes and to search for negative instances and alternative instances.
- Developing a second set of 'judgment-free' notes before developing categories.
- Conducting an audit of data generation and analysis strategies.

Furthermore, in this study, I presented a true reflection of the research participants' perspectives, and I assumed a neutral position to ensure that the findings were not influenced by my own views. My supervisors also critically questioned my interpretation and analysis of the data generated from the interviews.

3.9.5. **TRIANGULATION**

In social research, the term triangulation is used in a less literal sense – it involves the use of multiple methods and measures of an empirical phenomenon in order to overcome problems of bias and validity (Creswell, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011; De Vos et al., 2005). In other words, triangulation is the use of two or more methods of data generation in order to produce a richer description of the studied phenomenon (Chidiebere, 2015).

Triangulation arose from an ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes and, in case studies, it can be achieved by using multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003). It is an approach that utilizes multiple data sources, multiple informants, and multiple methods

(e.g., participant observation, focus groups, member checking, and so on), in order to gather multiple perspectives on the same issue so as to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomena. Triangulation is used to compare data to decide if it corroborates (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002), and thus, to validate research findings. It is one of the most important ways to improve the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings.

Figure 3.9.5.1 below shows the two methods I used to collect data for this study.



Figure 3.5.9.1: Data generation methods

After communicating with the study participants and securing their written and verbal consent to participate in the study, I began the data collection process using semi-structured interviews via WhatsApp. Once the WhatsApp interviews were conducted, I conducted the focus group interview via MS Teams. Triangulation is a major approach used to evaluate the outcome of this study. Individual interviews and a focus group interview were conducted with the study participants based on the interview schedules provided in Appendix A and B.

Although the use of the two data generation methods helped me tackle issues of validity and reliability of the data generated, my methodological choices, beyond triangulation, helped me generate in-depth data and develop a comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences of receiving written feedback. While I generated detailed data

through WhatsApp semi-structured interviews, the MS Teams focus-group interview enabled me to widen the range of responses from the participants and to activate forgotten experiences that were not mentioned in the semi-structured interview. This enhanced the depth of my research findings.

3.10. **Ethical considerations**

From a research perspective, Creswell (2009) defines ethics as widely accepted moral principles which offer rules and behavioral expectations from the researcher and respondents. This qualitative case study required me to interact with grade 10 learners who are all under the age of 18. Therefore, the study required high level of ethical consideration as the participants were minors. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) maintain that full disclosure and deception is one of many issues the researcher needs to take into consideration when dealing with human participants. The researcher is expected to be open and honest with the participants about all aspects of the study. In this study, I was open and honest about all aspects of the research. I used information sheets to inform the Gauteng Department of Education, schools' principals, SGB chairpersons, teachers, learners and their parents about my study.

Prior to embarking on this study, I requested permission to conduct research from the Regional Chief Director of the Department of Education (Gauteng). I sent a formal letter and an application form requesting permission to conduct research in two public secondary schools under the Johannesburg East District. After having explained the purpose of the study and the type of assistance that I needed from grade 10 Business Studies teachers, I was given a letter of access to the two secondary schools in the district. When I received the approval letter to conduct research, I sent emails to the schools' principals and SGB chairpersons in which I described my study and requested permission to invite learners to participate in the study. The principals from both schools granted me permission to conduct my study and recommended grade 10 Business Studies teachers that would help me choose the study participants. I then sent an email to the two Business Studies teachers, one in each school, in which I described my study as well as requested their assistance in identifying potential study participants according to academic achievement in grade 10 Business Studies. Having secured the teachers

written consent and recommendations for potential study participants, I emailed the two teachers information sheets, assent and consent forms which were forwarded to the potential participants and their parents. I received a positive response from the identified learners who granted me permission to conduct interviews about their experiences of receiving written feedback on grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment.

The other issue I considered regarding ethics was voluntary participation. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) argue that participants in a research project should not be compelled, coerced or forced to participate. The participants should be informed that they may terminate their participation at any time and all risks associated with the study should be fully disclosed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this study, no learner was forced to participate. Through the information sheets sent to learners and their parents, I explained that learners were not forced to participate and that they could withdraw anytime during the study. I also informed the study participants beforehand that they were responsible for any mobile data costs they would incur as a result of their participation in the study. Before I conducted the interviews, I invited the study participants (and their parents) to a meeting on WhatsApp to explain the contents of the information sheets as well as discuss the nature and process of my study. In the meeting, the study participants (and their parents) were encouraged to ask questions about any discomfort or confusion they were experiencing at that point. Confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed in the focus group interviews, therefore the participants were informed of this and they were told that prior to their participation in the focus group interview, they will sign a digital agreement, stating that they will not repeat what was discussed during the interview outside the focus group. I also assured the participants that their participation in the study was anonymous as their names, school's name or any personal information will not be disclosed in this study. In the study, all participants will be referred to using pseudonyms. The raw data including WhatsApp and Microsoft Team voice and video recordings will be stored in a password protected computer, with all identifying features removed.

Moreover, the University of Witwatersrand requires researchers to apply for ethical clearance before conducting any research project. Therefore, prior to embarking on this

study, I applied for ethical clearance from the University of Witwatersrand and was granted unconditional approval by the ethics committee of the University (Protocol number: 2020ECE006M)

3.11. **METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS**

As mentioned above, the study employed WhatsApp semi-structured and Microsoft Teams focus group interviews as data generation methods. The study also employed Thematic Analysis as a method to analyse data generated from the interviews. This section discusses the methodological limitations of the study

3.11.1. **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS THROUGH WHATSAPP**

Sometimes, in a WhatsApp semi-structured interview, the participants may get distracted, and start discussing issues that are not related to the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, this requires the research to have interviewing skills so that he/she can guide the participants back to the focus of the interview (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher (interviewer) may make the questions to be leading or prescriptive; therefore semi-structured interviews require precise planning (Creswell, 2012). The WhatsApp semi-structured interview methodology was chosen for this study because it offered convenience in data collection (Creswell, 2012). This data generation method was most suitable for my study because it help me ensure meaningful participation from the study participants, specifically because this method allowed the participants greater freedom, control and comfort during the interviews. To ensure that the interview questions were not prescriptive, I asked my supervisors to check the interview schedule and to comment and give suggestions on how best I could ask the questions without being biased or without leading the study participants towards a particular answer. In instances were a participant discussed issues that were not relevant to the study, I redirected their focus by asking a question that led them back to the topic of my study.

3.11.2. **FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW THROUGH MICROSOFT TEAMS**

One major limitation linked with Microsoft Teams focus group interview is that this type of interview methodology may hinder participants from discussing sensitive ideas (Creswell, 2012). Sometimes, the participants in the study may not be ready to discuss sensitive issues that may be useful for the study. Therefore, the discussion may be restricted and this would affect the overall data generated from this study (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, the data collected from MS Teams focus group interview may be biased towards more outspoken participants; therefore it may be difficult to assess the perspectives of less self-assured participant (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, during focus group interviews, my job as a researcher is to encourage participants to actively engage in the discussion. However, too much control or less control on my side may result in generation of less data on the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, in the focus group interview, I promoted interactions and open discussions to try to minimize discomfort that may have been felt by the participants.

Both methods of data generation required participants to have access to mobile data. A major limitation of this is that participants may not have mobile data on the day scheduled for their interview or they may run of mobile data during the interview. If this happens, the interview will be rescheduled for another day. I also identified network connectivity as a limitation for this study. Study participants may experience poor network connection which may make it difficult for them to participate productively in the interviews. If this happens, the interview will be rescheduled for another day.

3.11.3. **LIMITATIONS IN THEMATIC DATA ANALYSIS**

As mentioned above, Thematic Analysis is a method of analyzing data in relation to themes that emerged from the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data of similar topics is grouped together to determine patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One major limitation linked with this method is that Thematic Analysis may miss nuanced data if the researcher is not careful and uses thematic analysis in a theoretical vacuum (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, Thematic Analysis was adopted in this study because it

allowed me to develop and interpret themes that are supported by data (Clarke and Braun, 2018).

3.11.4. **SAMPLE SIZE**

This study was limited to twelve grade 10 Business Studies learners. Therefore, the absence of other students from the other grades in the FET band has been a limitation, yet the willingness and availability of the study participants provided an opportunity for in-depth discussions. Furthermore, the sample in this study is small and inhibits the drawing of generalizations. However, this study did not seek to generalize about the wider population, but sought an in-depth understanding of particular learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment.

3.11.5. **LANGUAGE**

Language speaking was identified as a limitation in this study. For most of the study participants, English is a second and /or third language. For this reason, sometimes participants found it difficult to understand some of the interview questions and to express their experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment in English language. To deal with the language barrier as limitation, during the interviews, participants who could not express a particular opinion in English were encouraged to code switch to their home language. When data was transcribed into written form, in English, it was given back to the participants so that they could confirm the accuracy of the information.

3.12. **CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented the research design and methodology for my study. The study followed a qualitative case study approach as it sought to provide in-depth knowledge about learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment in grade 10 Business Studies. The study was rooted in the interpretive paradigm and Thematic Analysis is the method used for data analysis. The data of this study was generated from 12 Business Studies learners who were purposively and

conveniently sampled. This chapter also discussed methodological limitations to acknowledge areas that would affect the production and analysis of data in this study. The next chapter presents the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, I outlined the research methodology and design which underpins this study. In this chapter, I present the findings of this study. The findings are presented with direct quotations from the semi-structured and focus group interviews of the participants. For each key research question, themes were identified and discussed.

4.2. **THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

The findings presented in this section were generated from twelve learner participants on their experiences of receiving written formative feedback on their grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment. As already explained in the methodology chapter, after gathering all the data, I listened carefully to the interviews which I later transcribed. I then carefully read through the transcripts and identified the patterns which I open coded and then developed into descriptive themes. This allowed me to become familiar with the content of the interviews and to be in a position to note subtle nuances in the responses of the interviewees (Brown & Dowling, 1998). I used thematic analysis to analyse the data for this study. Boyatzis (1998) reveals that thematic analysis is the easiest strategy of categorizing qualitative data as the researcher evaluates the data, makes notes and sorts it into different categories. The data generated in this study were categorized into two broad themes, namely; learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in Business Studies and learners' use of written formative feedback in Business Studies. Each theme is supported by sub-themes and verbatim quotes from the learners' responses.

4.3. **Learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in Business Studies**

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

different experiences which provided a great insight as to how assessment feedback influenced their learning of Business Studies. These experiences fit into the following sub-themes: Timing of formative feedback; Specificity of formative feedback and Valence of formative feedback. The discussion that follows unpacks these sub-themes.

4.3.1. **Timing of written formative feedback**

The first sub-theme which emerged from learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback was the issue of 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 3 to 4 weeks after a 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 moved onto the next topic. One learner 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 emphasized the negative impact of delayed assessment feedback on academic performance by stating that:

> "*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 assessment, 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 for 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 in order 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 emphasized the importance of timely formative feedback in their learning of Business Studies. They pointed out that timely written feedback would help them see their strength and weaknesses early and subsequently come up with strategies to overcome their weaknesses while they are still mindful of the assessed topics. When learners were given an opportunity to give any general comment relating to written formative feedback, they responded as follow:

> "*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 timing of written formative feedback suggest that the learners' experiences of receiving delay 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 due to "absence" of and "late" written formative feedback.

4.3.2. **Specificity of written formative feedback**

The second sub-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 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 constitute 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 interviews 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 generalized

feedback, which were not specific to their individual work. Learners in this study reported that sometimes they 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 individual 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. Personally, I want feedback that is specific to my own 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 own learning progress.*" – Learner A

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

The above responses emphasized the importance of differentiated written formative feedback in helping learners see their individual 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 own individual work which would help

them study the subject content in relation to their own individual understanding and/or misunderstanding of the assessed content knowledge. Learners also expressed that formative feedback that was not specific to their individual 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.

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 individual 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' expectation even though the feedback they received did not specify these expectations.

Generally, most learners in this study complained that the feedback they received lacked specificity, thus hindered 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 generalized feedback comments were explanations provided for their negative experience of receiving written formative feedback in Business Studies. The learners emphasized 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 individual work would help them

direct their energy towards specific areas of the subject content that require attention, which could help them learn strategically to improve their academic performance.

4.3.3. **Valence of written formative feedback**

The third sub-theme which emerged from learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback was the issue of valence of feedback. Learners who participated in this study reported that they either received positive or negative feedback, but have never received feedback that constituted a balance between the two. Findings from this study revealed that there was a correlation between marks and written comments that learners received. Learners in this study reported that they received positive comments when they had passed the assessment and received negative comments when they failed the assessment. The learners also reported that receiving 50% and above for an assessment task was considered a pass and this was always complemented with positive comments. The learners' responses read:

> "*I receive comments like 'invest more effort and interest to improve your work', especially for Business Studies essay tasks because I am not very good at those. When I read a comment like that on my script I feel judged because it* [feedback] *implies that I am not putting effort into my work.*" – Learner H

> "*I often get feedback that point out errors in my work. I never get suggestions of what I can do to improve.*"– Learner B

> "*When I read my teacher's feedback, I do not end up knowing what I am good at because the feedback only tells me about my errors.*" – Learner F

> "*When my marks are higher, I receive feedback that confirms that my work is good. I like that, but I also want to know my mistakes so that I can fix them.*" – Learner K

What emerged from the responses above is that learners often received feedback that is either corrective (negative) or reinforcing (positive), but they never received feedback that constituted a balance between the two. More importantly, findings from this study revealed that most learners received feedback that showed errors than appraisal for the

good work done. The interviews data suggests that feedback that reveals learners' errors does not necessarily help them gain a better understanding of their own errors. As indicated in the responses above, learners wanted to know how they could fix their errors in order to be able to fix them. Some learners pointed out that their learning of Business Studies is not enhanced mainly in terms of knowing the errors they made in their work, but through the suggestions about what they could do to improve. One learner reported the following:

> "*If I know my errors and what I can do to fix them, then I will use my teacher's suggestions when I study so that I don't repeat the same mistakes*" – Learner I

When learners in this study were probed to inquire if they would prefer positive feedback even when they have failed an assessment task, most of them said they would welcome the idea, since this would motivate them to study harder and subsequently improve their academic performance:

> "*I feel good when feedback is positive. If the mark is unsatisfactory but the feedback is positive, I will be motivated to learn*" – Learner C

> "*If the teacher values our work, then we will be confident to learn, but if they criticize our work, we will be demotivated to learn and to put effort in learning tasks*" – Learner G

The responses above suggest that negative feedback could have a damaging psychological impact on learners' learning. Learners' responses above indicate that they are demotivated by negative formative feedback, and this has a negative impact on their academic improvement and/or motivation to learn.

Generally, learners in this study experienced either positive or negative feedback, depending on the mark allocated for a particular assessment task. Those who have received negative feedback in most instances reported that they appreciated feedback that showed them the errors they had made, but preferred feedback that also indicated how to improve. Learners who received positive feedback also reported that they preferred feedback that did not only point out what they did well, but also areas of

improvement. Findings in this study suggest that learners wished to receive feedback that constituted a balance between positive and negative comments, regardless of the mark they received.

To sum up this section, learners in this study reported their experiences of receiving written formative feedback in terms of timing, specificity and valence of written formative feedback. Findings in this study revealed that learners received written formative feedback weeks after the submission of a written assessment tasks, and this constrained their learning of Business studies as feedback was received when they had forgotten the topic and/or when it was too late to act upon it. Findings also revealed that learners received written formative feedback that did not specify the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and how to make improvements. Additionally, findings also revealed that learners received either positive or negative written formative feedback, depending on the mark received for an assessment task, but never received feedback that constituted a balance between both positive and negative comments. Learners who mostly received negative feedback reported that it was discouraging because it failed to recognize their effort. These learners also reported that negative feedback damaged their self-esteem and decreased their motivation to learn Business Studies.

4.4. **Learners' use of written formative feedback in Business Studies**

Learners were asked to share their experiences of how they used written formative feedback they received from their teachers for Business Studies written formative assessments. Their responses revealed the following sub-themes: Clarity of formative feedback, focus on marks not on learning and self-regulation. The discussion that follows unpacks these sub-themes.

4.4.1. **Clarity of written formative feedback**

Responses from learners in this study revealed that they did not use written formative feedback because it provided information that was unclear and difficult to read. The learners' responses indicated that it was difficult to decipher written formative feedback information due to their teachers' illegible handwriting. Learners in this study complained that their teachers' illegible handwriting led to misinterpretation of feedback

information and they reported not using it [feedback] because they struggled to read the words and subsequently could not understand how to use it to inform their learning of Business Studies. The responses below are confirmation of the findings of this study:

> "*I do not use the written feedback that my teacher gives me because I find it difficult to read their handwriting. If I can't read what the teacher wrote, I cannot use it to make improvements.*" – Learner K

> "*In most instances, my teacher's written feedback is not clear, so I have to guess the alphabets to make sense of the words, which can be difficult. So I do not use the feedback I receive from my teacher because I find it difficult to read due to unclear handwriting.*" – Learner F

Other learners in this study added that they did not use written feedback because they received feedback in which the teacher underlined and/or circled the error, put a question mark and drew an emoticon (sad face) which left them confused and unaware of what they did wrong and how to proceed to improve their learning of Business Studies. This was reported by learners as follows:

> "*I am not sure what I am supposed to do when the teacher puts question marks on my scripts. In those instances, I do not use feedback*." – Learner J

> "*My teacher circles and underlines the errors on my Business Studies essays. Sometimes I don't understand why my answer is wrong. So I don't use feedback because it doesn't clarify why I am wrong.*" – Learner B

What emerged from the interviews data is that learners in this study did not use written formative feedback because they did not understand how to use it due to lack of clarity of feedback information. The learners reported that they could not decipher assessment feedback because of their teachers' illegible handwriting and their teachers' use of punctuation marks, such and question and exclamation marks, to communicate feedback. The above responses indicate that learners in this study viewed unclear feedback to be unhelpful in preparing them for future learning events. They reported that while they did want to use written formative feedback to improve their learning of

Business Studies, they did not use it because they did not understand it, and this caused frustrations. The interviews data suggests that learners did not only prefer written comments that are clear and easy to understand, but also feedback that does not only consist of punctuation marks, circles, and underlined errors. This was perhaps an indirect way to express a wish for written formative feedback that clarified why a specific section of their work was weak as opposed to feedback that only indicate errors on learners' work.

Findings in this study also revealed that learners found it difficult to decipher feedback information due to the vocabulary in feedback information. Learners who participated in this study reported that another factor that affected the clarity of written formative feedback was the language their teachers used to comment on their work. Learners reported that teachers used academic language that they did not understand thus they consequently did not use feedback to inform their learning of Business Studies. Responses extracted from the interviews read:

> "*I don't use written feedback because I do not understand some of the words the teacher uses to comment on my work. English is my second language and I don't think my teacher considers that when providing feedback.*" – Learner L

> "*I can't read my teacher's comments because she uses big words that I just don't understand. I can't use what I don't understand, so I just don't pay attention to feedback.*" – Learner D

The above responses emphasized the importance of feedback language in clarifying feedback information to learners. The learners' responses above suggest that feedback provided in a language that learners do not understand decreases its usability. The findings also suggest that feedback that is too complex contributes to the lack of engagement and retention of feedback on the side of the learners. Learners expressed that unclear feedback information due to the complexity of the language used caused frustrations and hindered them from using feedback to improve their learning of Business Studies.

4.4.2. **Focus on marks and not on learning from written formative feedback**

Learners in this study also reported that when they received written comments in conjunction with a mark, they ignored the comments and only focused on the mark because they viewed it as clearer feedback than the corresponding comments. Findings from this study revealed that learners viewed marks as more important than written comments, and therefore desired good marks irrespective of the quality of their work. Learners' responses are as follows:

> "*I focus on the mark I got for a task because I get it very clear in my head how I am doing, like whether I am passing or failing.*" – Learner J

> "*I ignore the comments and focus on the mark because it tells me my progress. If I get a higher mark for a task, it means I am doing well.*" – Learner H

> "*I don't do anything with the written comments that I receive, I just look at the mark and that's it!*" – Learner L

Another learner in this study reported that marks were more important over written comments because they were a deciding factor of whether or not he passes the grade at the end of the school year. The learner reported the following:

> "*I worry about failing at the end of the year. So when I get feedback I look at the mark to see how I am doing. If my mark is higher, I feel content and if it is low or if I fail the task I feel less keen to learn.*" – Learner D

What emerged from the responses above is that learners who participated in this study were more interested in marks allocated for assessment tasks than on learning from formative feedback. The responses above indicate that learners desired good marks because they were an indication that they were doing well in Business Studies. The interviews data suggest that learners in this study did not use written formative feedback to improve their learning, but focused on marks to judge their own learning progress. The learners also pointed out that when they were provided with an opportunity to resubmit a written assessment task, they only did so to improve their marks as opposed

to learning from their mistakes. The responses below are a confirmation of these findings:

> "*Sometimes I don't even understand my mistakes. I just redo the task to improve my marks.*" – Learner E

> "*When I rewrite the task I don't even think. I just copy what the teacher has corrected on my paper because I want good marks.*" – Learner A

Generally, learners in this study ignored written comments and focused on marks, seeing marks as more honest feedback compared to corresponding written comments. Learners in this study reported that they focused on marks because these gave them a clearer indication of how they are doing in Business Studies. Learners also emphasized that they paid particular attention to their marks out of fear of failure. Surprisingly, most learners in this study reported not using formative feedback to improve their learning of Business Studies, even though this could lead to improved academic results. The findings revealed that when learners achieved satisfactory marks, they assumed they were doing well in the subject and when they received unsatisfactory marks, they felt less keen to learn. In both instances, learners did not use feedback to improve their learning of Business Studies.

4.4.3. **Self-regulated learning**

Although most learners in this study reported not using feedback, few learners reported that they used feedback to inform their learning, irrespective of the factors that were reported to hinder the usefulness of feedback, such as delayed timing, lack of specificity and lack of clarity of written formative feedback. These learners reported that although there was a mismatch between the feedback they desired and the feedback they received from their teachers, they took it upon themselves to regulate their own learning. They further reported that to improve their academic performance, they had to be active participants in the learning process, which meant they had to find ways to make feedback information useful. Responses extracted from the interviews read as follows:

> "*Sometimes when my teacher underlines and circles errors in my Business Studies essays, I go back to my textbook to study that specific topic because to me it means that I did not understand it very well.*" – Learner G

> "*My teacher uses big words to comment on my work. So I just ask someone to interpret the feedback for me so that I can use it to improve my learning.*" – Learner E

These learners also reported that they were intrinsically motivated to deeply understand the Business Studies content knowledge thus used feedback as guidelines when they revisited the learning material.

> "*I find Business Studies very interesting; I want to understand it well. So when the teacher circles errors on my scripts, I revisit that section in the textbook to study it so that I can understand it.*" – Learner G

> "*When feedback information is simplified for me, I revisit the textbook to memorize knowledge until they understand it.*" – Learner E

What emerged from the above responses is that the learners' objective to understand Business Studies content knowledge motivated them to find ways to make written formative feedback useful. The responses above indicate that these learners had a sense of responsibility in their learning of Business Studies thus strategically used written formative feedback to enhance their understanding of the content knowledge. More importantly, these learners reported that while they received late, non-specific and unclear written formative feedback, they still used it to ensure they did not repeat the same mistakes in future assessment tasks. The interviews data suggest that despite their challenging experiences of receiving written formative feedback, the self-regulated learners in this study took responsibility for their own learning and actively sought ways to make the feedback they received on their formative assessments usable in order to fully understand the subject matters.

4.5. **CONCLUSION**

The findings in this study revealed that learners have had negative experiences of receiving written formative feedback in grade 10 Business Studies, specifically in relation to timing, specificity, valence and clarity of assessment feedback. Learners' in this study experienced delayed feedback that did not specify which sections of their work was well done and which needed improvement. Learning in this study also experienced feedback that was either positive or negative and have never received feedback that constituted a balance between the two. In terms of the use of feedback, the findings revealed that learners in this study focused on the mark achieved and ignored the corresponding narrative comments. Learners responded to formative feedback in this way due to the factors that affected the clarity of feedback information such as illegibility of teacher's handwriting and complexity of feedback language. Interestingly, a few learners in this study reported that they actively sought ways to make feedback useful by seeking clarity and additional information from their teachers and/or a knowledgeable other.

Having presented the findings of the study, the next section presents a synthesis of the data and the theoretical understandings.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the data generated from semi-structured and focus group interviews using the thematic analysis method discussed in chapter 3. The purpose of this chapter is to conclude the thesis by synthesizing the main arguments and to present my conclusions. In this chapter, I firstly outline a summary of the chapters in this study and discuss the findings of this study. Thereafter, I address some limitations of this study and offer suggestions for addressing the challenges that emerge from the findings. Finally, I provide suggestions for future research.

5.2. **SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS**

This study consists of five chapters, and each chapter has its own particular focus. However, the chapters are not isolated, they are interconnected and together they explore learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on written formative assessment in grade 10 Business Studies.

Chapter 1 introduced the study and outlined the post-apartheid context underpinning assessment reform. A brief discussion of assessment change was highlighted, noting the transition from summative, norm-referenced assessment to formative assessment (Carless, 2009). The National Protocol for Assessment emphasized the need for formative assessment in South African classrooms as a way of encouraging learners to reflect on their own learning and to make value judgments of their strengths and weaknesses (DoE, 2012). Along with the emphasis on formative assessment, the National Protocol for Assessment also emphasized the need for good quality formative feedback which was, and still is, viewed as a crucial source of reference which learners can use to identify a gap in their learning, and from which they can find recommendations to close the gap (DoE, 2012). Although there are different modes of providing assessment feedback, written feedback is the most preferred and commonly used mode of giving feedback to learners, especially in South African classrooms

(Chidiebere, 2015; Iron, 2008; Mostert & Quinn, 2009; Naidoo, 2007). As such, this study aimed to explore learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on written formative assessment in grade 10 Business Studies classrooms in South Africa. Chapter 1 also outlined the research objectives and key research questions, and provided a brief discussion of the study context, theoretical framework, the research design and methodology that was used in this study. The chapter concluded with an outline of the five chapters that are in this study.

Chapter 2 provided a literature review on students' experiences of receiving written formative feedback. The literature review was presented thematically – this was useful in helping me identify academic discourses relating to this study as well as in helping me identify the gap in knowledge which gave relevance to this study. Due to the lack of research on the phenomenon in the South African school context, I reviewed local and international literature which mostly focused on higher institution students' experiences of receiving written formative feedback. The literature revealed that most students have had negative experiences of receiving written formative feedback due to factors relating to timing, comprehensibility, specificity, amount, clarity and valence of feedback. The general pattern was the mismatch between students' feedback needs and feedback supplied.

Chapter 2 also discussed the theoretical framework employed in this study and its relevance for this study. The theoretical framework employed in this study was the social constructivism theory (Vygotsky, 1978). From the social constructivist perspective, feedback is viewed as any information about the gap between the learner's actual level and the potential level of development, which is used to alter the gap in some way (Vygotsky, 1978). For learners to move from their actual to their potential level of development, teachers should provide effective formative feedback. Therefore, this study aimed to understand learners' experiences of receiving written feedback and how they use this type of feedback to inform their learning of Business Studies in an attempt to move from their actual to their potential cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Chapter 3 discussed the research methodology and design, were I gave reasons as to why I chose to adopt a qualitative case study approach and to locate this study in the interpretive paradigm. The chapter firstly outlined the philosophical and methodological positioning in general and then discusses the case study approach that was used to explore grade 10 Business Studies learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback. Thereafter, it provided a description of the research context, the sampling strategies and data generation methods that were employed in this study. The study used purposive and convenience sampling strategies and employed semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp voice calls and focus group interview through Microsoft Teams video call as data generation methods. The chapter also discussed the data analysis method employed in this study, which was Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis was a suitable method to identify key themes and address the research questions. The chapter concluded with appropriate and necessary considerations of the research by taking into consideration issues of trustworthiness, ethics and methodological limitations.

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this study. This was done through the two key themes, namely; learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in Business Studies and learners' use of written formative feedback in Business Studies. From the interviews data, the following six sub-themes emerged; Timing of written formative feedback; Specificity of written formative feedback; Valence of written formative feedback; clarity of written formative feedback; focus on marks not on learning from written formative feedback and self-regulated learning. The findings revealed that most learners have had negative experiences of receiving written formative feedback and consequently did not use it [feedback] to inform their learning of Business Studies. However, findings also revealed that a few self-regulated learners did use feedback regardless of the factors that were reported to hinder the usefulness of written formative feedback.

Finally, chapter 5 discusses the findings with reference to the theoretical framework and in relation to the literature discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, the chapter outlines the

summary and addresses some limitations of this study. The chapter concludes with the implications for future practices and recommendations for future research.

5.3. **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

In this section, I discuss the findings on learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback and how they use it in their learning of Business Studies. This is an effort to understand why grade 10 Business Studies learners in South Africa use feedback the way they do. This discussion is presented thematically and in relation to the debates identified in the literature review and the theoretical framework that underpins this study.

5.3.1. **LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF RECEIVING WRITTEN FORMATIVE FEEDBACK IN BUSINESS STUDIES**

In the analysis of data relating to learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on their grade 10 Business Studies written formative assessment, three sub-themes emerged: Timing of written formative feedback; Specificity of written formative feedback and Valence of written formative feedback. The following discussion unpacks these sub-themes.

5.3.1.1. **Timing of written formative feedback**

In the analysis of the data from the interviews, one distinct finding revealed that 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 (Attali & van der Kleij, 2017; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Quinn & Nakata, 2017; Swart, Nielen and Sikkema-de Jong, 2019). Learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in relation to the timing of written formative feedback revealed that feedback practices in the schooling context fall short of the principles outlined in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Education [DoE], 2011) and the National Protocol for Assessment (NPA) (DoE, 2012). 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, 2012]. 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 3 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, 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, Murray & Scott, 2010; 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 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 which is activated through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Gredler, 2009). Timely assessment feedback has a potential to help learners 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 may in turn delay learners from reaching their potential level of development.

It was also found that learners did not receive written feedback unless they specifically sought it out and that when they did seek for feedback, they received it weeks later. This emphasizes that learners in this study received delayed written feedback, whether or not they actively sought it out. 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 own learning progress and delays teacher-learner collaboration to monitor learners' current level of achievement in relation to the learning intentions (Sardareh & 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 seemed to interrupt teacher-learner collaborative effort in the learning process which subsequently constrains learners' understanding and knowledge construction (Sardareh & Saad, 2012).

The current study shows that written formative feedback is most effective to support learning if provided immediately (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 to enhance the effectiveness and usefulness of feedback as well as to encourage productive learning.

5.3.1.2. **Specificity of written formative feedback**

Feedback is the ongoing provision of information to guide learners' performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The provision of feedback is a critical element of the learning cycle, and to be effective, it [feedback] must be specific (Brookhart, 2008). In the context of this study, specificity of written feedback refers to the extent to which comments on learners' work specify areas that were well done and areas that need improvement (Brookhart, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback is also considered specific when the comments relate to an individual learner's learning progress and gives him/her guidance on how to proceed (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In light of this, findings in this study 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 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 Vu, Harbaugh, De Roo, Biesterveld, Gauger, Dimick and Sandhu (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 schooling context falls short of the principles outlined in the FET Business Studies CAPS document (DoE, 2012) and the NPA (DoE, 2012) which state that feedback should specifically inform learners 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 in relation to the learning intentions (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). Feedback should specify learners learning progress to enable learners to not only actively monitor their learning progress but also control their success in the learning process (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). The findings in this study suggests that learners were not able to use written feedback to actively control their success in the learning process because the feedback they received on their learning tasks did not specify good and weak sections of their work, and how to improve.

It was also found that learners received generalized feedback that did not specify their individual learning progress. Learners in this study reported that they received the same comments irrespective of the difference in their work and the mark achieved. This finding corresponds with the findings in Engelsen and Smith's (2010) and van der Kleij's (2019) case studies which documented that learners received standardized feedback in

a 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 interviews data in this study revealed that learners did not use written feedback because generalized and standardized phrases they received from their teachers – which were not specific to their individual work – did not lead to greater learning possibilities.

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. Therefore, teachers should make an attempt to enhance the specificity of the feedback they give to learners in order to enable learners to monitor their learning progress and improve their academic performance.

5.3.1.3. **Valence of written formative feedback**

In terms of valence of written formative feedback, the interview data in this study revealed that learners received either negative or positive feedback, depending on the mark achieved, but never received feedback that constituted a balance between positive and negative comments. Learners in this study reported that they received positive comments on their work when they achieved a mark of 50% and above and negative comments when their mark was below 50%. This finding suggests that higher-achieving learners received positive feedback and under-performing learners received negative feedback. The findings in this study corroborate with a previous study (Gentrup, Lorenz, Kristen & Kogan, 2020) which documented that under-achieving learners received negative comments on their work which led to frustrations and demotivated them to use feedback to improve their learning. In the same way, findings in this study revealed that under-performing learning received feedback that showed errors than appraisal for the good work done. The interviews data also revealed that negative comments did not necessarily help learners gain a better understanding of their own errors. Furthermore, findings in this study revealed that higher-achieving

learners wished to receive corrective comments that prepared them for future learning events, but only received appraisals for work well done.

The results of this study suggest that when learners receive written formative feedback that balance positive and negative comments, they are more likely to learn from feedback than when they receive either positive or negative comments on their work. Learners in this study reported that negative feedback that only pointed out their academic weaknesses demotivated them to learn thus they often made the same mistakes in their next assessment tasks. Similarly, those learners who received only positive comments could not identify their mistakes and/or weak sections in their work, thus also made the same mistakes in their next assessment tasks. The findings in this study concur with Brookhart's (2008) view that to enhance learning from feedback, feedback should be both corrective (negative) and reinforcing (positive). This study clearly shows that when feedback is either negative or positive, and does not constitute a balance between the two, learners' productive learning will be constrained.

5.3.2. **LEARNERS' USE OF WRITTEN FORMATIVE FEEDBACK IN BUSINESS STUDIES**

5.3.2.1. **Clarity of written formative feedback**

Assessment feedback serves a central purpose of supporting learners' learning, thus it should be clear to the learners (Brookhart, 2008). Findings in this study revealed that learners had difficulty deciphering their teachers' handwriting and language used in feedback information, and consequently did not use feedback to enhance their learning. These findings correspond with prior research (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Jamalinesari, Rahimib, Gowharyb, Azizifar, 2014; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010) which revealed that linguistic clarity and legibility had an effect on how learners' received and subsequently used assessment feedback. Findings in this study revealed three factors that hindered the clarity of written formative feedback: teachers' illegible handwriting, complexity of feedback language and use of punctuation marks (specifically question and exclamation marks) and circling of errors to communicate feedback. Learners in this study reported

that they could not understand their teachers' feedback, and this caused frustrations and resulted in lack of engagement with feedback. According to the social constructivism theory, learning is not an individual process but a collaborative effort between learners and a knowledgeable other (teacher) (Martinez, 2010). In this study, learners' experiences of receiving feedback suggest that there was no collaborative effort between teachers and learners to enhance the learning process. Feedback may be clarified through teacher-learner dialogues, and this is most likely to increase its usability (Woo & Reeves, 2007). However, findings in this study revealed lack of teacher-learner collaborative effort in formative feedback practices, which constrained both the comprehensibility and usability of feedback information on the side of the learners.

This study clearly indicates that written formative feedback that lacks clarity negatively affects learners learning. Reading illegible handwriting and complex vocabulary in feedback caused stress and frustrations for the learners in this study and made it difficult for them to use feedback to improve their learning of Business Studies. It may, therefore, be said that unclear written feedback can constrain learners from using feedback to enhance their learning, because learners may not be able to decipher what they have to do next to improve their learning, prepare for future assessment tasks and improve their academic performance if they do not understand feedback information.

5.3.2.2. **Focus on marks not on learning from written formative feedback**

The data from this study also revealed that when learners received written comments in conjunction with a mark, they only focused on the allocated mark and ignored the corresponding comments. Learners in this study reported that the marks they received for their written formative assessments were more important than the comments because marks determined whether or not they passed the assessment task and the grade at the end of the school year. This finding corresponds with the findings in van der Kleij's (2019) case study which documented that learners were more interested in the marks than the corresponding comments because they [marks] confirmed whether they [learners] passed or failed. Learners in this study reported that marks were more important to them because they showed whether or not they understood the content

knowledge. For these learners, high marks suggested that they understood the assessed topics while marks lower than 50% meant they were struggling with the subject matters.

More interestingly, learners in this study were motivated by the mark than the corresponding comments, and reported that marks were clearer and understandable form of feedback. However, this study revealed that the motivation to achieve high marks did not lead to productive learning of Business Studies as learners in this study could not decipher feedback information in order to know what to do next to improve their learning – this was due to the factors mentioned above; lack of specificity and clarity of feedback information. When presented with an opportunity to re-do an assessment task, the learners in this study copied what the teacher had corrected on their scripts in order to improve their marks, without showing a better understanding of the content knowledge. This finding corresponds with previous studies (Jones et al., 2012; van der Kleij, 2019; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). It may be said that the way in which learners in this study used feedback to improve their marks constrained their cognitive development. Learners in this study copied their teacher's corrections to improve their marks, without understanding the content knowledge, thus they could not progress towards higher mental processes and towards greater independence in the learning process (Mayer, 2004). The social constructivism theory maintains that formative assessment feedback can be used to guide learners to the next step of cognitive development – from their actual towards their potential level of development (Thurlings, Vermeulen, Bastiaens & Stijnen, 2012). Copying corrections to improve marks can be said to constrain learners' ability to construct new understanding of the content knowledge and as a result slow down their progress towards their potential level of development.

5.3.2.3. **Self-regulated learning**

Self-regulation in learning can be described as the ability to actively set goals in learning, take responsibility in learning and put effort in attaining the goals (Asikainen, Parpala, Virtanen & Lindblom-Ylanne, 2013). Self-regulated learners are aware of

themselves as learners and they play an active role in their own learning (Asikainen et al., 2013).

Findings in this study revealed that although most learners did not use written formative feedback to inform their learning, a few learners played an active role in making feedback useful in their learning of Business Studies. These learners reported that in instances where feedback language was too complex, they sought interpretation and clarity from a more knowledgeable other in order to make feedback understandable and useful. These learners also reported that they were intrinsically motivated by the school subject (Business Studies) that irrespective of the factors reported in this study to hinder the usefulness of written feedback, they actively found ways to make feedback useful to improve their understanding of Business Studies. This finding corresponds with the social constructivism theory which maintains that self-regulated learners, who are intrinsically motivated to deeply understand the content matter for themselves, actively seek ways to make feedback useful (through interactions with a more knowledgeable other) in order to bridge the gap between their actual and potential level of development (Gredler, 2009; Martinez, 2010; Selepe & Moll, 2016).

Furthermore, the interviews data revealed that some of the self-regulated learners in this study used feedback information to identify errors in their work and then revisit the subject material to memorize knowledge until they understood it. Although this may be viewed as a surface approach to learning, these learners reported that they were motivated to learn Business Studies and maintained that using feedback information in this way helped them learn and understand the subject matter well.

The findings relating to self-regulated learning in this study suggests that learners' own intentions of studying and their motivation to study are important factors that perpetuate learners to use written formative feedback. Although the self-regulated learners in this study used feedback information differently, their objective was the same, that is, to understand Business Studies content knowledge well. Interestingly, the data from this study suggests that learners who used feedback in conjunction with surface approach to learning learned and understood Business Studies content knowledge.

5.4. **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

I have identified three limitations in this study:

- The data for this study was collected at only one time-point (only in term 3). Learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback could change over time. This study is unable to capture changes of any learner experiences of the phenomenon.
- This study explored experiences of receiving written formative feedback of 12 learners from 2 different public schools. Therefore, results cannot be generalized as different schools may have different formative feedback practices – resulting in different experiences of receiving written formative feedback.
- This study lacked a teacher's perspective. Sometimes, making conclusions based on only one sample can be risky because their views can be biased.

5.5. **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICES**

The following are some of the implications for future practices:

- This research provides support for learners' voices on the issue of written formative assessment feedback, and suggests that learners feedback needs are not taken into consideration. Therefore, teachers need to consider how they communicate feedback, to ensure that it supports diverse learning needs of their learners.
- There should be workshops for teachers that tackle issues affecting the effectiveness of assessment feedback.
- Teachers should be trained with techniques that empower them to provide assessment feedback that supports learners' productive learning.
- Learners should be trained with techniques that empower them to develop self-regulatory capacities so that they can use feedback to improve their own learning.

5.6. **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The following are recommendations for any future study:

- A future study could be conducted at multiple time-points to capture changes in learners' experiences of receiving written formative assessment feedback over time.
- A future study can be strengthened by including learners from three or more schools or by comparing public and private schools learners' experiences of receiving written formative assessment feedback.
- An investigation into learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback in various General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET) subject disciplines, specifically in South Africa.
- An investigation of learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback using other methodologies.

5.7. **CONCLUSION**

This study contributed knowledge about learners' experiences of receiving written formative feedback on written formative assessment in grade 10 Business Studies in the South African school context. While many studies have focused on teachers as providers of feedback, which led researcher to investigate their actions and the actual content of their feedback, this study explored learners' perspectives and experiences of the feedback given to them by their teachers, a phenomenon that has been understudied in education research. The findings of the study revealed that learners have negative experiences of receiving written formative feedback. Multiple factors, including delayed/late feedback, feedback that lacks specificity and clarity, and valence of feedback were explanations provided by learners for their negative experience of receiving written formative feedback in grade 10 Business Studies. Findings also revealed that due to the negative experiences of formative feedback, most learners did not use feedback; rather they focused on the mark allocated and not on learning from feedback. However, findings also revealed that a few learners who have developed self-regulation capacities did use feedback, irrespective of experiencing the issues that have

been reported as constrains for effective use of written formative feedback. Drawing from these findings, it may be concluded that learners are overlooked as a vital resource to inform assessment feedback practice, hence there is a mismatch between learners' feedback needs and the feedback supplied. It is therefore hoped that over time, feedback practices will be implemented in a circular fashion, which will allow learners feedback perspectives and needs to have a real impact on enhancing teachers' feedback practices.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview schedule

Appendix B: Focus group interview schedule

Appendix C: Plagiarism report

Appendix D: Ethical clearance certificate

APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. What is your understanding of assessment?
2. What is your understanding of formative assessment feedback?
3. Do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?
4. How often do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?
5. Do you receive written formative feedback on written Business Studies assessment tasks?
6. How long after submitting a Business Studies written formative assessment task does it take for you to get written formative feedback from your teacher? (e.g in less than a week; 1 week; 2 weeks; 1 month; more than a month)?
7. Tell me some of the written comments you have received on your written Business Studies assessment tasks.
8. What do you do with the written feedback you get from your Business Studies teacher?
9. Can you share your experiences of receiving written feedback in this subject? I am also interested in knowing why you have those particular experiences?
10. Does the feedback you receive improve your learning of Business Studies? Explain your answer.
11. How important is it for you to get written formative feedback for the assessment tasks you do in Business Studies?
12. Comment on what can be done to improve written formative feedback in this subject.

Semi-structured interview: Learner A

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of assessment?**

Learner A: Assessment is a task for you to complete. It is meant to check if you understood what was taught in class.

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of formative assessment feedback?**

Learner A: I think formative feedback is detailed explanation about what you did wrong and what you can do to improve your marks.

Interviewer: **Do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner A: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: **How often do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner A: 2 to 3 times a week

Interviewer: **Do you receive written formative feedback on written Business Studies assessment tasks?**

Learner A: 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 in order to improve

Interviewer: **How long after seeking for feedback does it take for you to get written formative feedback from your teacher? (e.g in less than a week; 1 week; 2 weeks; 1 month; more than a month)?**

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

Interviewer: **Tell me some of the written comments you have received on your written Business Studies assessment tasks.**

Learner A: I have received the same comment so far this year. The teacher just writes “You can do better” on all my scripts, regardless of the mark allocated.

Interviewer: **What do you do with the written feedback you get from your Business Studies teacher?**

Learner A: I receive the same comment all the time. I do not use the feedback I receive in this subject because I do know what to do with it. I don’t know how to “do better” so I just read it and that’s all. Also, I receive written feedback weeks after writing a task. It doesn’t help me much with improving my performance because it comes too late when there isn’t much I can do with it to make sure I do better next time.

Interviewer: **Can you share your experiences of receiving written feedback in this subject? I am also interested in knowing why you have those particular experiences?**

Learner A: I don’t find the feedback I receive in this subject useful, so I do not have positive experiences of receiving feedback, I only have negative experiences. So, when I received the same comment for the third time in a row, I was so disheartened. The comment did not specify areas I did well and areas that needed improvement. I felt like the comment was directed at me, like personally, not at my work. I mean, feedback should be about my work, right? I want to know how I can improve my work and the feedback I have received in this subject to date has not been useful at all.

Another feedback experience I’d like to mention was when the teacher wrote the same comment for everyone, irrespective of the mark allocated. I was demotivated to even use the feedback because it was not related to my work as an individual. I couldn’t even tell what was wrong or right with my work and how I could improve my own learning.

Interviewer: **Does the feedback you receive improve your learning of Business Studies? Explain your answer.**

Learner A: No, it doesn’t. The comment “you can do better” doesn’t show that the teacher recognizes my effort and it doesn’t specify areas that need improvement.

Because the feedback I receive isn't clear and specific, and doesn't tell me the way forward, it doesn't improve my learning of Business Studies.

Interviewer: **How important is it for you to get written formative feedback for the assessment tasks you do in Business Studies?**

Learner A: It is very important. I want to know my progress, like how I am doing in this subject and what to do to improve. This can help me focus my energy on specific areas/topics that I am struggling with.

Interviewer: **Comment on what can be done to improve written formative feedback in this subject.**

Learner A: The teacher should put more effort when providing feedback. Feedback should be provided a few days after writing a task, because then I would still be aware of the topics that were tested. Feedback should be clear, tell me what exactly I am doing right and what I should do to correct my mistakes.

Also, I don't think the whole class should get the same comment, especially when our marks are not the same. Personally, I want feedback that is specific to my own 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 own learning progress

Semi-structured interview: Learner C

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of assessment?**

Learner C: Assessment is a task given by the teacher to test if you understand the things that she or he taught in class.

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of formative assessment feedback?**

Learner C: Information you get from the teacher to make you understand what you did wrong in the task and what you can do to do better next time.

Interviewer: **Do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner C: Yes.

Interviewer: **How often do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner C: 2 or 3 times a week. We write class tests and class work 2 to 3 times a week because the teacher wants to check if we understood what was taught in the previous or current lesson.

Interviewer: **Do you receive written formative feedback on written Business Studies assessment tasks?**

Learner C: Not a lot. For some tasks we do receive written feedback, for some we don't. We just do corrections.

Interviewer: **How long after submitting a Business Studies written formative assessment task does it take for you to get written formative feedback from your teacher? (e.g in less than a week; 1 week; 2 weeks; 1 month; more than a month)?**

Learner C: If we do receive written feedback for a specific task, it will be weeks after we wrote the task.

Interviewer: **Tell me some of the written comments you have received on your written Business Studies assessment tasks.**

Learner C: 'Study hard', 'you can do better'. Sometimes the teacher writes 'good work' for everyone who got 50% and above and 'needs improvement' for everyone who got below 50%.

Interviewer: **Would you prefer positive feedback even when you've failed a formative task?**

Learner C: I feel good when feedback is positive. So, if the mark is unsatisfactory but the feedback is positive, I will be motivated to learn.

Interviewer: **Okay. So tell me, what do you do with the written feedback you get from your Business Studies teacher?**

Learner C: I just look at it and that's it. I always study hard, so when the teacher tells me to study hard I get confused because I am already studying hard. Also, the feedback I've received doesn't tell me step-by-step what I should do, so I just look at it, that's it.

Interviewer: **Can you share your experiences of receiving written feedback in this subject? I am also interested in knowing why you have those particular experiences?**

Learner C: I have received similar comments on all the tasks we have done so far - comments like "study hard", "you can do better", and "need improvement". To me, these comments suggest that I am not doing very well in Business Studies. The problem is, through these comments, I don't get to understand what is it that I need to do to improve. That's why I don't even use feedback in my learning of Business Studies.

Interviewer: **Does the feedback you receive improve your learning of Business Studies? Explain your answer.**

Learner C: Not at all. In fact it is just upsetting and demotivating. I don't know what to do to do better or to improve. The feedback I receive doesn't tell me how to improve my learning.

Interviewer: **How important is it for you to get written formative feedback for the assessment tasks you do in Business Studies?**

Learner C: It is important ma'am. But the feedback must be informative, so that it can help me improve.

Interviewer: **Comment on what can be done to improve written formative feedback in this subject.**

Learner C: Feedback should be clear in terms of what I need to do to improve. It should tell me my strengths and weaknesses as well as how to improve.

Semi-structured interview: Learner F

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of assessment?**

Learner F: Assessment is a task given to learners by the teacher to test how much the learners have learnt.

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of formative assessment feedback?**

Learner F: The information that the teacher gives you to tell you how good or how bad you've performed in a task.

Interviewer: **Do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner F: Yes.

Interviewer: **How often do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner F: 2 times a week

Interviewer: **Do you receive written formative feedback on written Business Studies assessment tasks?**

Learner F: Yes.

Interviewer: **How long after submitting a Business Studies written formative assessment task does it take for you to get written formative feedback from your teacher? (e.g in less than a week; 1 week; 2 weeks; 1 month; more than a month)?**

Learner F: 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.

Interviewer: **Tell me some of the written comments you have received on your written Business Studies assessment tasks.**

Learner F: Good work, you have a potential to do better. These are just comments I can read. In most instances, I find it difficult to read the comments because my teachers' handwriting is not very clear.

Interviewer: **What do you do with the written feedback you get from your Business Studies teacher?**

Learner F: When I read my teacher's feedback, I do not end up knowing what I am good at because the feedback only tells me about my errors. In most instances, my teacher's written feedback is not clear, so I have to guess the alphabets to make sense of the words, which can be difficult. So I do not use the feedback I receive from my teacher because I find it difficult to read due to unclear handwriting

Interviewer: **Does the feedback you receive improve your learning of Business Studies? Explain your answer.**

Learner F: No. It doesn't tell me how to correct my errors. So I don't know how I can use it to improve my learning of Business Studies.

Interviewer: **How important is it for you to get written formative feedback for the assessment tasks you do in Business Studies?**

Learner F: It's important ma'am. Plus if it is clear and informative, you can always use it as a point of reference so that you don't repeat the same mistakes in other tasks.

Interviewer: **Comment on what can be done to improve written formative feedback in this subject.**

Learner F: 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

Semi-structured interview: Learner G

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of assessment?**

Learner G: An assessment is a way to test learners' knowledge on what they have learnt so far.

Interviewer: **What is your understanding of formative assessment feedback?**

Learner G: Is to give a report on someone's understanding of the assessed concepts or concepts that were examined.

Interviewer: **Do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner G: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: **How often do you write Business Studies formative assessment tasks?**

Learner G: 2 times a week

Interviewer: **Do you receive written formative feedback on written Business Studies assessment tasks?**

Learner G: Yes.

Interviewer: **How long after seeking for feedback does it take for you to get written formative feedback from your teacher? (e.g in less than a week; one week; 2 weeks; one month; more than a month)?**

Learner G: After 2 weeks. My teacher has a lot of Business Studies classes so it takes long for him to finish marking.

Interviewer: **Tell me some of the written comments you have received on your written Business Studies assessment tasks.**

Learner G: I get comments like 'good work' and 'keep up the good work'. Sometimes my teacher doesn't write a comment, he just underlines and circle errors on my scripts.

Interviewer: **What do you do with the written feedback you get from your Business Studies teacher?**

Learner G: I find Business Studies very interesting; I want to understand it well. So when the teacher circles errors on my scripts, I revisit that section in the textbook to study it so that I can understand it. Sometimes when my teacher underlines and circles errors in my Business Studies essays, I go back to my textbook to study that specific topic because to me it means that I did not understand it very well.

Interviewer: **Can you share your experiences of receiving written feedback in this subject? I am also interested in knowing why you have those particular experiences?**

Learner G: The feedback I receive is hard to understand, when you just read it and don't ask the teacher for clarity, because my teacher writes question marks, underlines and circles the errors. But I don't let this demotivate me. When I get feedback I go to my teacher to ask questions, like what did I do wrong and how I can improve. The additional information I get from my teacher serves as guidelines that help me study. After a discussion with my teacher, I go back to my textbook and classwork and I learn the topics again, so that I can understand them better.

Interviewer: **Does the feedback you receive improve your learning of Business Studies? Explain your answer.**

Learner G: Not the written one. The written one isn't very clear. But when I receive both written and verbal, I am able to understand it better and use it to inform my learning.

Interviewer: **How important is it for you to get written formative feedback for the assessment tasks you do in Business Studies?**

Learner G: It is important because feedback lets you know whether or not you are on the right track.

Interviewer: **Comment on what can be done to improve written formative feedback in this subject.**

Learner G: Written feedback should always be followed by a conversation that clarifies the written feedback. This will help us understand feedback and use it to improve our performance in Business Studies.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How would you define formative assessment feedback?
2. How often do you receive written formative assessment feedback?
3. Please share some of your experiences of receiving written feedback on Business Studies written formative assessments?
4. What do you do with the written feedback you receive from your teacher?
5. What is important to you between the mark you receive and the written comments? Give a reason for your answer.
6. What recommendations would you make with respect to the feedback you get for your assessment tasks in this subject?

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Interviewer: **How would you define formative assessment feedback?**

Learner E: Comments about your performance.

Learner D: The information that the teacher gives you to tell you how good or bad you've performed in a task.

Learner H: Information about how I have performed in an assessment and how I can improve.

Learner G: Comments given to learners by teachers after writing and assessment to inform the learner about their learning progress, including their understanding and misunderstandings of questions or topics.

Learner J: Information about how to correct the mistakes you did in a task.

Learner L: Information given to you after an assessment to tell you about your strengths and weaknesses.

Learner B: A short breakdown of how you've performed in a particular task.

Interviewer: **How often do you receive written formative assessment feedback?**

Learner L: Not often, 3 to 4 weeks after submitting a task.

Learner B: We get feedback 3 weeks after writing an assessment.

Learner A: We do not get feedback, we only do corrections.

Learner J: We do not get feedback unless we ask for it from the teacher.

Learner H: Yes, I ask my teacher for feedback because if I don't, I won't get it. But even after I've asked for feedback, I get it weeks later.

Learner F: I get feedback 3 to 4 weeks after writing a task.

Interviewer: **Please share some of your experiences of receiving written feedback on Business Studies written formative assessments?**

Learner A: Well, I receive feedback when it is too late to use it, so I do not find the feedback I receive useful. Also, I receive the same comment on all my formative tasks. So, when I received the same comment for the third time in a row, I was so disheartened. The comment did not specify areas I did well and areas that needed improvement. I felt like the comment was directed at me, like personally, not at my work. I mean, feedback should be about my work, right? I want to know how I can improve my work and the feedback I have received in this subject to date has not been useful at all.

Learner C: In most cases, my teacher writes the same positive comment for those who got 50% and above and the same negative comment for those who got below 50%. This is the reason I'd say I have negative experiences of receiving feedback. I never receive feedback that is specific to my work, and to me, this is unfair. My feedback should inform me about my errors and my strengths. Receiving the same feedback on our work, which is obviously different, is really unhelpful.

Learner A: Yes, yes. I don't think the whole class should get the same comment, especially when our marks are not the same. Personally, I want feedback to be specific to my own work because this shows that the teacher sees my efforts.

Learner D: I agree with [Learner C]. 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 I: I also have negative experiences of receiving written feedback. I often receive feedback that does not relate to the work I have done. When I get feedback, I always ask myself what I could have done to improve my mark. I think the answer should be in the written comments, but all I get is "Invest more effort and interest to improve your mark".

Learner F: I receive written feedback when it is too late to fix my mistakes, so I often repeat the same mistakes in most Business Studies tasks. My most notable experience of receiving written feedback on Business Studies tasks is that when I read my teacher's feedback, I do not end up knowing what I am good at because the feedback

only tells me about my errors. I don't even look forward to receiving feedback because it is just so discouraging.

Learner G: my teacher underlines and circles errors on my scripts. This is frustrating because she doesn't elaborate on what exactly I did wrong and what I can do to improve. But, I am very interested in business education and I want to understand it well. So when I receive feedback that is unclear, I go and seek clarity from my teacher.

Learner E: I also do the same. When I don't understand the words my teacher used on the feedback, I ask him to simplify the comments for me so that I can use feedback to fix my mistakes.

Learner B: I often get feedback that point out errors in my work. I never get suggestions of what I can do to improve. I never thought of seeking additional information like the other learners. I think feedback should point out errors and at the same time offer suggestions for improvement.

Interviewer: **What do you do with the written feedback you receive from your teacher?**

Learner K: Well, I do not use the written feedback that my teacher gives me because I find it difficult to read their handwriting. If I can't read what the teacher wrote, I cannot use it to make improvements.

Learner J: I am not sure what I am supposed to do when the teacher puts question marks on my scripts. In those instances, I do not use feedback.

Learner D: I can't read my teacher's comments because she uses big words that I just don't understand. I can't use what I don't understand, so I just don't pay attention to feedback.

Learner B: My teacher circles my errors and puts question marks all over my paper. I do not use feedback because I don't know what's wrong with my work and how I can improve.

Learner G: When I don't understand the feedback well, like when my teacher circles errors on my work, I just revisit the assessed topic in the textbook and re-learn it so that I can understand it better.

Learner F: My teacher's handwriting is not clear so it is difficult to read the feedback comments. So I don't use feedback because I don't understand it.

Learner E: If the teacher underlines statements on my Business Studies essay, which to me means they are incorrect, I go back to my textbooks to memorize the statements so that I can write then correctly next time.

Interviewer: **What is important to you between the mark you receive and the written comments? Give a reason for your answer.**

Learner J: The mark ma'am. When I get feedback, I focus on the mark I got for a task because I get it very clear in my head how I am doing, like whether I am passing or failing.

Learner H: The mark is important to me. I ignore the comments and focus on the mark because it tells me my progress. If I get a higher mark for a task, it means I am doing well.

Learner L: The mark is important, that's why I don't do anything with the written comments that I receive, I just look at the mark and that's it!

Learner D: The mark. I worry about failing at the end of the year. So when I get feedback I look at the mark to see how I am doing. If my mark is higher, I feel content and it is low or if I fail the task I feel less keen to learn.

Learner E: I get so excited when I am given an opportunity to rewrite the task. Sometimes I don't even understand my mistakes. I just redo the task to improve my marks. The mark is important to me.

Learner A: For me too. When I rewrite the task I don't even think. I just copy what the teacher has corrected on my paper because I want good marks.

Interviewer: **What recommendations would you make with respect to the feedback you get for your assessment tasks in this subject?**

Learner B: Feedback should be provided early, when we still remember the topic that was tested.

Learner F: I agree. Feedback should be provided early. We shouldn't write another task without getting feedback for the previous task because we will repeat mistakes that could have been corrected through feedback.

Learner L: Yes, we want to know our progress and how to improve or do better in future tasks. So feedback should be provided on time, maybe a few days to a week after the task was written.

Learner E: Feedback should be clear. The teacher should not only underline errors and put question marks. Tell me what's wrong with my work and how I can improve.

Learner C: Feedback should be about my work. General comments are unhelpful.

Learner A: The whole class shouldn't get the same comment. I want feedback to address my work as an individual. This will help me understand my own learning progress and what I can do to improve.

Learner I: Feedback should not only be negative. Negative comments are demotivating. I think feedback should have both negative and positive comments.

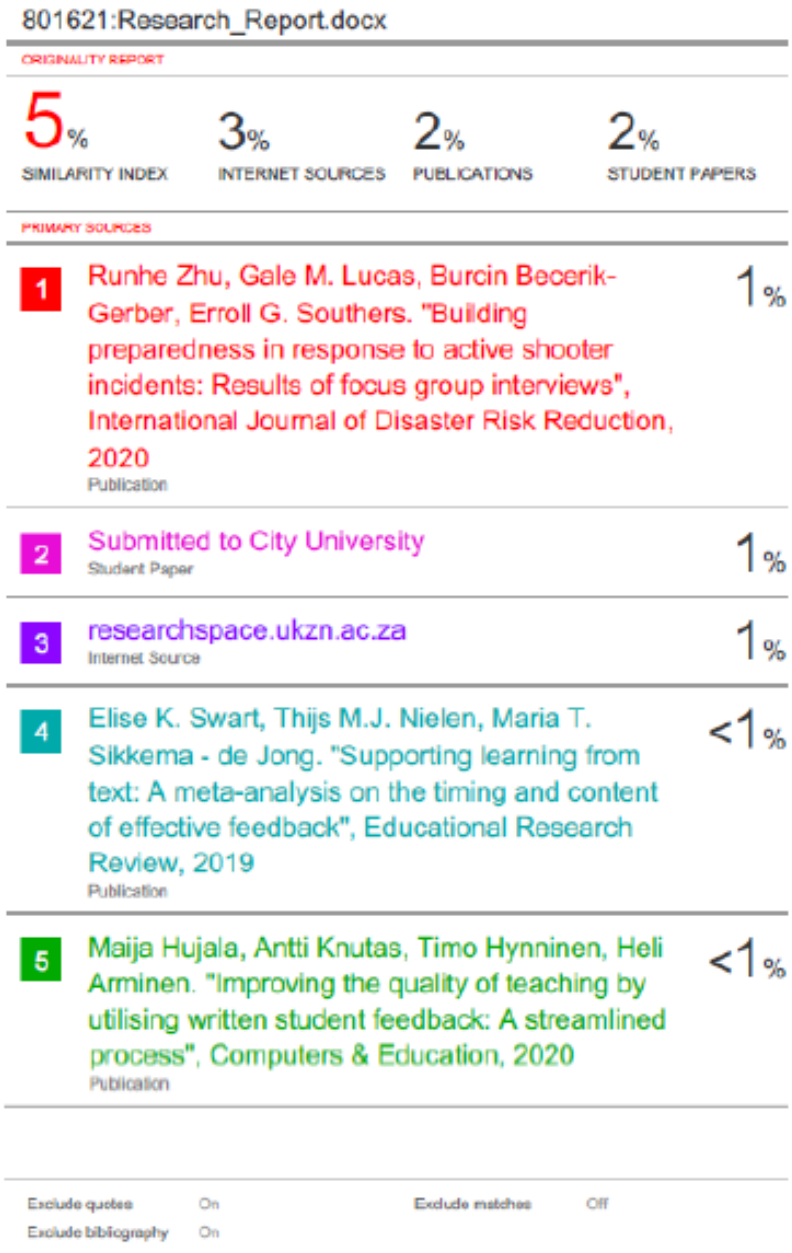
Learner G: The teacher should use a language that we can understand when providing feedback. It's difficult to understand big words, that's why some learners don't use feedback

Learner K: I want my teacher to stop criticizing my work. Tell me something positive about my work, and then offer suggestions on how I can improve.

Learner H: I don't use feedback because I don't know what to do with it. So, I think feedback should suggest what I can do next because this will help me prepare for future tasks.

Learner J: Feedback should tell me which section of my work was well done and which one needs improvement.

APPENDIX C: PLAGIARISM REPORT



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ORIGINALITY REPORT

5%	3%	2%	2%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Runhe Zhu, Gale M. Lucas, Burcin Becerik-Gerber, Erroll G. Southers. "Building preparedness in response to active shooter incidents: Results of focus group interviews", International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020 Publication	1%
2	Submitted to City University Student Paper	1%
3	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	1%
4	Elise K. Swart, Thijs M.J. Nielen, Maria T. Sikkema - de Jong. "Supporting learning from text: A meta-analysis on the timing and content of effective feedback", Educational Research Review, 2019 Publication	<1%
5	Maija Hujala, Antti Knutas, Timo Hynninen, Heli Arminen. "Improving the quality of teaching by utilising written student feedback: A streamlined process", Computers & Education, 2020 Publication	<1%

Exclude quotes	On	Exclude matches	Off
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APPENDIX D: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

WITS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: 2020ECE006M**
PROJECT TITLE	Exploring learners' experiences of receiving written feedback on written formative assessment: A case study of grade 10 Business Studies classrooms in South Africa
INVESTIGATOR	Raudina Madina Balele
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	WITS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
DATE CONSIDERED	13 June 2020
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
EXPIRY DATE	Date of submission of the project report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 29 June 2020

CHAIRPERSON _____
(Dr Paul Goldschagg)

cc: Supervisor: Dr Preya Pillay