3.1 Introduction

Teacher feedback may not always be useful to students because students sometimes may not understand teachers’ feedback. To make teacher feedback clear and useful, researchers and eminent professors have found solution through writing conferences where students can meet teachers and discuss the comments given. So research in the area of teacher feedback has shown that teacher-students conferencing helps ESL writers to improve their skill significantly. Some early researchers recommended this type of feedback as it is effective as far as second language writing is concerned. Hence, teacher-student writing conference as a pedagogical tool will help to improve the writing skills of ESL students1.

The present study was an attempt to examine students’ and teachers’ perceptions on teacher-students conferencing, a feedback method and its impact on developing writing skills. This chapter explains the design of the study, data collection procedure and tools used to collect the data. It also provides an overview of the methodology, research questions, setting of the study, participants, writing conferences and writing tasks used for this study. The purpose of the study was to determine the impact of writing conferences on developing writing skills of the first year engineering students. The study was set out to see whether the method of writing conferences will lead to greater improvement in content and grammatical accuracy in students’ writing. Before the actual study was taken up, to test the tools prepared and the methodology, a pilot study was conducted.
3.2 Hypothesis

Teacher-student feedback conferencing would help in improving the writing skills of students significantly in terms of content and grammar.

3.3 Research Questions

This experimental study was designed to find out the answers for the following research questions.

1. How do writing conferences help students to improve their writing?
2. What are the students’ perceptions and expectations about writing conferences?
3. What are the teachers’ perceptions about writing conferences?

3.4 Research Methodology

The main focus of the study was on the use of writing conferences, the perceptions and expectations of students and teachers on conferences and how far this type of feedback is useful for students’ writing. The components examined in the present study were: (1) how do writing conferences help students improve their writing and (2) the perceptions and reactions of students and teachers at engineering colleges. To answer the above research questions, a preliminary study was carried out with students and teachers to know their problems in writing. An intervention study was planned and carried out with students to show a solution to their writing problems. It was done in a natural setting at an engineering college to provide accuracy and reliability. Since the study was basically
descriptive in nature, qualitative method was used to analyse the data. At the same time, quantitative analysis was used for pre-test and post-test scores.

Qualitative methods in research are commonly used to know cultural and individual behaviour and practices in our society. These are also employed to know the ways which influence these practices, allocation or sharing of resources available across the country or among the people, and the consequences of this sharing of resources (Green et al., 2003; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). A number of researchers generally employ various methods to collect data and use both qualitative and quantitative data analysis method. It can be called an interpretative methodology which investigates how a particular group of people behave in social contexts and their behaviors are interpreted or analysed to make sense of everyday interactions (Dyson, 1987; Erickson, 1986).

Using qualitative research method in specific context has become prevalent from 1971, when Janet Enig got published her study, titled “The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders” (Schultz, 2008). Schultz also said that qualitative method offers researchers required tools to examine writing across boundaries, and beyond the prescribed understandings and uses of texts to inform classroom practices and research. Popularity of qualitative method in writing research shifted researchers and teachers to focus away from texts. In addition, these research methods emphasized the psychological processes of composing and the social context surrounding these practices. Based on the background, researchers began focusing on the identification of resources rather than on the errors learners made. Researchers and teachers were able to understand not only how people write the themes, genres, and forms of student writing but also felt that description, examination and explanation are needed to achieve this goal than merely
focusing on mere cause and effect. Nonetheless, to study some research problems from different stand points, triangulation techniques are more useful to map out fully the richness and complexity of human behaviour. Furthermore, it is a powerful way in qualitative research to demonstrate concurrent validity (Campbell and Fiske, 1995, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Based on the discussion above connected to validity and trustworthiness, the present study used methodological triangulation. It means using different methods for the reliability of data. Teacher’s and student’s questionnaires, written feedback on students’ written drafts, teacher-student writing conferences and informal discussions were used for the data triangulation.

3.5 Data Triangulation

Research must be carried out at institutions or at homes etc. where there is no possibility of manipulating data or findings. To enhance the validity of research findings, multiple data collection tools or sources or strategies must be used. Keeping these factors in mind, the present study was carried out in an engineering college i.e. in the classroom and used multiple tools to triangulate the data. Triangulation is defined as;

“The use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspects of human behaviour …..the use of multiple methods or multi-method approach is ubiquitous...” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.141).
3.6 Setting of the Study

The pilot study was conducted with first-year engineering students at JBREC (Joginpally Bhaskar Rao Engineering College) Moinabad, prior permission was sought from the college management to conduct research so that the participants and teacher had an idea of the researcher’s presence. The college is located in Ranga Reddy District of Telangana which is 35 km away from Secundrabad. The classrooms, English language laboratory and teacher desk were used to complete this pilot study. The participants who took part in this study were asked to come to the teacher's desk for discussion. The aim of the study was to determine the impact of writing conferences in improving writing skills.

3.7 Profile of the Students

The majority of the students who took part in this study came from the twin cities and the neighbouring villages of Hyderabad and Secundrabad and some of them were from different districts of Telangana. The students had appeared for the EAMCET, a common entrance test for the engineering courses in JNTU, Hyderabad and its affiliated colleges in Telangana State. Most of the students had completed Intermediate (class 12) at both Government and corporate colleges which have a common curriculum and practices across the state. It is a well-known fact that these colleges do not give importance to languages. They are directly or indirectly trained to ignore the language classes and give importance to core science subjects. This is the main reason for the poor response of the students in language classes, when they come to engineering colleges. Teachers at engineering colleges always complain that students do not understand the value of the English language.
3.8 Research Instruments

Research tools were prepared to answer the research questions set for this study. The tools were designed to understand the teachers’ and students’ perceptions on writing conferences and its impact in developing writing skills. Since the study was intended to probe into various aspects of writing with the purpose of eliciting and developing writing skills among the engineering students, the following tools were used to facilitate the research.

- Questionnaires
- Classroom observation checklist
- Teacher’s feedback
- Writing tasks
- Students revised scripts
- Writing conferences
- Informal discussions

3.8.1 Students’ Questionnaires

The student questionnaire was designed to answer the research questions set for the present study. It can be considered as one of the popular methods of data collection to get responses for any research where respondents give their responses without any fear and bias. This is the simple and easiest way to get respondents opinions about something. Mainly, these areas were covered in the questionnaire. It has two parts: the part was intended to collect data from students about their basic information and their views on learning writing and problems they face in learning writing. The second part of the
questionnaire was about students’ perceptions and expectations on writing conferences which was administered after the intervention study.

3.8.2 Classroom Observations

Classroom observation was taken up to see the actual practices of teaching writing at the college where the study was carried out. Classroom observation was undertaken in order to find out the ways in which the teachers taught writing in the class and if they were checking students’ written scripts and giving feedback on them. It also intended to have the first hand information about the problems faced by the students in learning writing and the practical problems of the teachers over there. The researcher observed the writing classes and recorded the teaching and learning processes using a checklist when the classes were in progress. It helped the researcher to plan for the main study. The checklist consisted of 9 questions on how teachers teach writing and how the learners respond and work on the given tasks.

3.8.3 Teachers’ Questionnaires

A questionnaire with close-ended questions was administered to get responses from the teachers about their perceptions on writing conferences in developing writing skills at tertiary level. It focused on mainly three areas such as teaching practices of teachers, teacher written feedback or comments and finally perceptions of teachers on writing conferences in developing writing skills. The questionnaire was designed to get the personal and professional information about the teachers who were teaching in the engineering colleges in and around Hyderabad. This section was designed to get the personal information like names of teachers, qualification, specialization they studied and
teaching experience. The information obtained may help the researcher to understand teachers’ ability and skills in teaching English language.

### 3.8.4 Teacher Feedback

This is the main tool used in the present study to collect data required at the natural setting from the students. It became central to the present research. Though it is a labour intensive and time-consuming work, it is very useful for students to understand their weaknesses and strengths in writing. Practically there are limitations and time constraints in our country where teachers are overburdened with a lot of responsibilities. The researcher himself was the one who gave feedback on the students’ written drafts.

### 3.8.5 Students’ Revised Scripts

Students revised their compositions after teacher's feedback and writing conferences with teacher-researcher. These compositions were collected and analysed to find out how the students revised their scripts after teacher feedback and writing conferences, whether the conferences helped the students to improve their writing. The analysis of the revised scripts helped the researcher to realize the use of writing conferences along with written feedback in developing writing skills.

### 3.8.6 Teacher-Student Writing Conferences

It is believed that teacher-student writing conferences can bring a significant change in students’ writing because they would have an opportunity to meet and discuss their problems. As per previous researchers, well planned and executed writing conferences
will have a tremendous impact on the students writing. The success of writing conferences purely depends on how well they are planned and organized.

In the present research, the researcher had planned well before the actual conferences took place. He used both one to one conference and small group conference depending on the situation and availability of the participants. In case there were only a few participants available, the conference was one to one. They used to sit with the teacher-researcher and discussed the issues they wanted to discuss. This was also a wonderful time for the participants to talk to the teacher-researcher alone. Writing conferences are formal discussions with the students on their written drafts. This gave them an excellent opportunity to discuss their problems and doubts with the teacher-researcher.

The teacher-researcher kept a diary during the conferences with the student participants to note down the important issues because the college management and the teachers did not permit the researcher to record audio or videorecording. They did not agree for the video recording because they were apprehensive that the data collected might be used for other purposes.

3.8.7 Writing Tasks

Writing tasks were also one of the main tools to collect data from the participants during the intervention. These are vital for any research to prove how much the participants learned during the intervention. Essay writing was chosen for the present study in all stages of the study such as pre-test, main study, and post-test.

Argumentative essays were given to them to write in maximum 300 words. The following are the writing tasks used for the study:
### Table 1: the tasks used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Facebook is useful for engineering students’. Do you agree?</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Smart phones: A boon or a bane?</td>
<td>Main study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘Money makes many things’. Do you agree? Or disagree?</td>
<td>Main study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>‘Private schools are better than public schools’</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.9 Data Collection Process

The present study was conducted at an engineering college in Hyderabad in different phases to obtain the set objectives. The following table describes the procedures used for the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Preliminary Study</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questionnaire was administered</td>
<td>Classroom observation with a checklist</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Main Study</td>
<td><strong>Intervention Study</strong> with 30 students</td>
<td>Two writing tasks, each task was revised twice</td>
<td>Writing conferences were conducted with students in small groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase 3 Discussions & Interviews

| Informal discussions with students to know their perceptions and expectation for writing conferences |
| Informal discussions with teachers to know their perceptions about writing conferences. |

*Table 2 procedure used for the study*

### 3.11 Preliminary Study

Prior to the main study a preliminary study was carried out with the undergraduate students of an Engineering college to understand the problems of the engineering students in the English language. The study was conducted at JBR Engineering College, Moinabad, Ranga Reddy District of Telangana. These participants had completed Plus 2 / Intermediate Course and joined engineering courses through EAMCET, a common entrance test for engineering and medicine in Telangana. It was assumed that all these students had the same level of proficiency in English because of their same educational background. Fifty (50) first year engineering students, who were interested to take part in the pilot study, were selected randomly for the study. The procedure of the study was explained to the students clearly before the study was carried out.

#### 3.11.1 Classroom Observations

As a part of preliminary study, classroom observation was done to identify the problems in teaching of writing and learning. A checklist was prepared and used for the classroom observations. It aimed to find out how the English teachers taught writing to their
students. Since there were six English teachers, all these teachers’ classes were observed with the prior permission of the concerned teachers and the management. Only the writing classes were observed.

3.11.1 Pre-test

A pre-test was administered to the students to know the problems they had with regard to their writing skills. With the help of the pre-test it was understood that most of the students have problems in writing coherently with grammatical accuracy. The pre-test was administered to fourteen students as a part of pilot study. It was conducted during their free time and participants were asked to write an essay in about 300 words on the given topic. The written drafts were collected and analysed to find out the errors in their writing if any. Based on the pre-test result, the teacher-researcher made a decision that the focus of the feedback must be on the content, vocabulary and grammatical issues in the students’ writing.

3.12 Main Study

Based on the findings of the preliminary study, it was confirmed that the hypothesis proposed and the research design for this study could be tested reasonably. The main study was planned and conducted with the students who were studying first year engineering at JBR Engineering College, Moinabad, Ranga Reddy District, Telangana. The main study was carried out in the same way as the preliminary study was conducted
with the fifty participants. The total number of subjects who participated in the main study was thirty (30).

### 3.12.1 Treatment Sessions

Once the preliminary study was done and the problems were identified by the researcher, it was necessary that their problems must be addressed. So the researcher took some classes on how to write an essay. The researcher focused on the problems the students had during the pilot study. Before essay writing was taught, the researcher took a class on paragraph writing which made it clear to the students how to organize ideas in a paragraph. The material used for the intervention study was taken from the first year course book *Fluency in English*, prescribed by the Jawaharlal Nehru Technical University, Hyderabad.

### 3.12.2 Intervention Study

Once the preliminary study was carried out with the students, they were asked to express their willingness to participate in the main study to which all of them gladly agreed. Although the study initially started with 50 participants, 20 participants dropped from the study in the middle the main study was done with only 30 participants. Student participants who had participated in all writing the tasks were taken into consideration for the data interpretation. They participated in two writing tasks. Every task was revised twice and writing conferences were conducted twice with them. The procedure of the intervention study is given below.

The student participants were given a writing task (argumentative essay) and were asked to complete it within the time limit of 40 minutes. As soon as they finished the writing
task, they were asked to submit their scripts to the teacher-researcher and were instructed to meet him the following week. They were told to come to the language laboratory and take back their respective write-ups with the teacher-researcher’s comments.

The students came back to the language lab on the scheduled day at the appointed time and the teacher-researcher returned them their scripts ready with his comments. After sometime, the experimental group had conference. The students in the experimental group met the teacher to discuss their problems in the first draft. The conferencing method gave the experimental group learners an opportunity to meet the teacher-researcher face to face and discuss their problems and understand the mistakes they had made. It was a small group writing conference between the students and the teacher-researcher, for about 10 to 15 minutes. The study had set some guidelines to carry out the writing conferences without any problems. The conferences were held according to the following guidelines:

- 10-15 minutes for each writing conference session.
- The students will meet the teacher alone or in a small group to discuss their problems in writing.
- It will be done in their free time or during the language lab session.
- The teacher will be ready to address their questions.
- The teacher will make oral comments on students’ writing performance, especially content, vocabulary, organization, syntax and the related issues.
- The teacher will help them to understand their errors and identify the areas which can be improved.
• The discussion will be restricted to only the specific piece of written draft which is brought to the conference.

The students were asked to revise their drafts based on the feedback given to them. The revised drafts of the students were assessed by the teacher to understand how far they had been able to improve and make corrections on the basis of the feedback given to them.

The same procedure was used to carry out the second writing task. After the two tasks and two feedback sessions, the students were asked to prepare themselves for the post-test.

3.12.3 Post-test

A post-test was conducted at the end of the intervention study to see how far the teacher’s written feedback and writing conferences had helped the students to improve their writing at. The student participants in the intervention study were asked to write a post-test. The post-test written scripts were evaluated by two other English teachers from the neighbouring college to provide validity to the assessment. These two teachers happily agreed to act as raters and evaluate students’ written scripts.

3.12.4 Informal Discussions after Post-test

As part of the data collection, informal discussions were held with the participants and the six English teachers by the researcher. It was not well planned in advance but some of the questions were framed contextually. Four of the student-participants who had performed well and four other participants who had not perform well in the post-test were selected for the informal discussions to know about their perceptions and opinions on the
use of writing conferences for developing writing skills. It was also intended to get suggestions from them about what could further improve their performance.

Before the informal discussions were held with the students and the teachers, their consent for the same was taken from them. The selected participants in the discussion were informed about the objective of the discussion to make them feel free to express their views clearly without any fear or hesitation. As students requested to think of possible issues that they might bring forth during these discussions, they were granted a few minutes to think. The questions asked were related to their performance and use of writing conferences. First, factual questions were asked to them to know their background and their opinions were sought in the end of the interview. It was ensured that the participants were comfortable to give their views by instilling confidence in them.

The discussions addressed students’ background knowledge, previous experience with writing conferences or oral feedback and suggestion for improvement. The semi-structured interview questions are outlined below:

**Background related**

1. How long have been studying English language?
2. Do you read in your free time?
3. Do you write e-mails to your friends and relatives?
4. Do you like to write something? If yes, what do you like to write?

**Feedback related**
5. Do you always get feedback on your written drafts from your teachers?
   If yes, what kind of feedback your teachers generally give you?

6. How did you feel each time your essay was returned with corrections and teacher's comments?

7. What are the major issues you would like to improve as far as writing is concerned?
   For example: grammatical, mechanics, organizational issues and the like.

8. How did you feel each time you are asked to rewrite your drafts?
   Were you happy to do the corrections?

9. If you had a problem to understand the corrections or teacher commentary on written drafts, what did you do?

**Writing conference related**

10. Who you know about writing conferences before you joined this experimental study?

11. How did you feel for the first time when you came to discuss with your teacher about your writing?

12. Did you think the writing conferences you attended were useful?
   If yes, can you describe, how writing conferencing helped you?

The discussions were held in the English language laboratory of the college, where the study was carried out, during their free time. Once the discussions were completed, each response from the participants was taken and examined whether it was positive or negative or neutral regarding writing conferences.
This helped the researcher a lot to understand the perceptions and responses of the student participants and the teachers on writing conferences held with them.

3.13 Nature of Data Analysis

As already stated, the present study used teacher’s questionnaires, teacher written feedback, students’ written scripts and pre-test and post-test scores to triangulate data. These tools were analysed to determine teachers’ perceptions of teaching writing and commenting on student written drafts to make out whether there was any difference between teacher perceptions and practices. Written feedback and interaction between students and teacher-researcher during the writing conferences were analysed based on students’ revised compositions written by them. Then the students’ compositions in the post-test were analysed. The discussion between the researcher and the students and with the teachers during the informal interaction were analysed based on their given responses. Thus, data collected from all sources were analysed and interpreted followed by the triangulation of data for recording the findings.

3.14 Conclusion

This chapter on the research design offered the details of the data collection procedures followed in conducting the preliminary and the main study. The study was carried out in three phases as already mentioned earlier. The chapter also presented the research questions and research hypothesis and the research methodology adopted for carrying out this study. Both qualitative and quantitative processes of data analyses were followed. The rational for the qualitative methodology, development of data collection devices
were also discussed in detail. The data collection tools used for collecting data included students’ written scripts, student’s questionnaire, teacher’s questionnaire, teacher's feedback, student-teacher writing conferences, classroom observations and finally informal discussions with teachers and students. The underlying principle in selecting the sample, the different data collection tools were also discussed in this chapter.