

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Administration Yuan established Educational Reform Committee in 1996 to set policies for educational reform. Among other things, the Committee of the Basic Competence Test for Junior High School Students was given responsibility for two major missions. One is to abolish traditional Joint Secondary Entrance Examination (SJEE), which has generated many controversial educational problems. The other is to develop Basic Competence Test (BCT) for junior high school students to meet the new curriculum objectives.

The impact of BCT has been widespread. The Basic Competence Test for Junior High School Students is the only national test to measure what junior high school students have achieved in five subject areas. Administered at the end of the third year of junior high school education, BCT plays an essential role in evaluating the achievement of junior high school graduates nationwide. Since 2000, BCT has been held twice every year in five subjects: Chinese, English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. More than three hundred thousand junior high school graduates in Taiwan are assessed every year. As a nationwide examination, the results of BCT are applied by all high schools, including senior high schools, vocational schools, and

five-year colleges, as a criterion to screen their new students. Such a high-stakes test may exert a considerable influence on students' future.

With a view to improving our education, the educational authority adopts BCT as a revision of the traditional SJEE, which has aroused grave teaching and learning problems (Song, 1998; Tsai, 1998; Ho, 2000; Yu, L., 2000). Although BCT is quite new, it has served as guidance in coordinating the development of teaching and learning (Cheng, 1998). When it comes to the comments from the public (Minsheng Daily, 2001, January 6; The Central News Agency, 2002, May 12; The Central News Agency, 2003, June 22; United Daily News, 2003, June 23), many teachers regarded that the design of BCT items are mostly based on the content of Curriculum Standards developed by the Ministry of Education. That means the test is intended to measure the amount of learning that a student has accomplished during junior high school education. For teachers in junior high schools in Taiwan, teaching to such a test would be part of their job, and they are supposed to help their students stay on track.

Moreover, the test results offer useful feedbacks to both groups about the effectiveness of teaching and learning process (Brown, 1996). In short, BCT plays an important role to help teachers improve teaching and help students improve learning.

The new test form of BCT intends to realize the goals announced in the Core Competence Indicator issued by the BCT Center, and to match the aim of educational

reform. Also, it is expected to support school instruction and the formation of students' correct learning habits (Cheng, 1998). However, after several administrations, BCT has provoked some criticisms (Zhang, 2001; Lay, 2001; Chian, 2001).

First, many criticize that the test excludes listening (United Daily News, 2000, November 2; Minsheng Daily, 2000, December 31). English BCT is theoretically viewed as one of the major devices to measure the candidates' success in performing purposeful tasks and their actual ability to communicate in English. As its name "Basic Competence Test" implies, the primary concern is to judge students' fundamental achievement in their learning. In addition, with the same principle, the Core Competence Indicators of English Subject declared by the BCT Center consists of four skills of language competence, namely, speaking, reading, listening and writing. Since listening ability has been highlighted in these years with the public anticipating listening test to be involved in tests for a long time, BCT's omission of listening test is considered "driving back instead of moving forwards" (Minsheng Daily, 2000, December 31). Parents as well hesitate to confide in a test with such a critical exclusion.

Secondly, a frequent criticism from teachers goes that "language is not multiple-choice" (Brown, 2002), which indicates that language proficiency cannot be

accurately tested only through multiple-choice questions. While traditional tests contain various question types, such as translation, sentence making, and fill-in-the-blank, the BCT format is restricted to multiple choices. Despite the fact that the receptive skills like reading, listening, and grammar knowledge can be efficiently assessed through multiple-choice format, chances for the guessing factor remain, from 33% to 25%, depending on the number of options employed (Brown, 2002). The public further wonders if such a test format can diagnose students' ability. Teachers are also indecisive if they should develop students' writing skills by giving exercises such as translation, sentence making, and fill-in-the-blank, or just spare as many class periods as possible to give students numerous drills simply on multiple choices.

Thirdly, teachers and students are worried that BCT's content, especially items containing reading passages are not covered by the textbook. Because BCT emphasizes testing reading competence, seven of the fourteen Core Competence Indicators of English Subject announced by the BCT Center are set to evaluate reading ability and about 55% of the test items of BCT are intended for reading comprehension (The Central News Agency, 2002, May 12). Although grammar and vocabulary instruction remain essential components in foreign language teaching, the focus has been shifted from a stress on grammar and vocabulary to reading comprehension. However, many forms of the BCT reading passages such as time

tables, notes, ads, posters, invitation cards, poems, tour guides, and so on can't be located in the textbooks. As a result, reading more English newspapers and doing more reading comprehension exercises are suggested for gaining higher scores (Lee, 2001; Yang, 2001; Minsheng Daily, 2001, January 6; United Daily News, 2003, June 23). Many teachers, particularly those in cities, thus do not limit their teaching to the textbooks only. They equip their students with supplemental reading materials to enhance reading ability. In short, it is suspected that the content of BCT is not congruent with that of the textbooks published by the Ministry of Education, and thus stirred worries from teachers and students.

Fourthly, unstable test difficulty has been detected (United Daily News, 2000, November 2; The Central News Agency, 2001, June 10; The Central News Agency, 2002, May 16; The Central News Agency, 2003, August 11). In the year of 2001 when BCT first appeared, it was made easy for students. In the second year, however, it became thornier. This time the question stems were too long for the examinees to answer (The Central News Agency, 2002, May 16). To get good scores in such tests, scholars advised students start learning English even when they are in elementary schools. The public also commented that under Taiwan's circumstances of "teaching to the test", the unsteady test difficulty might confuse teachers in their instruction and students in their preparation.

Purpose of the Study

Having nine years' experiences as a junior high school teacher, the researcher instructs her students in accordance with the Curriculum Standards, and cultivates students' English ability in four skills. However, students sometimes complain that since BCT will not test their writing ability, teachers should not waste time plaguing them with spelling or sentence writing practices, which are more difficult than other skills and often, frustrate them more. The researcher also wonders if she should continue her balanced instruction in the future as she has been doing these years. In addition, reading comprehension has been too important recently. The BCT Center anticipates students to apply the knowledge from textbooks to answer test items. However, the textbooks do not provide teachers and students with sufficient amount of content in accordance with it. In order to enhance student's test-taking ability, the researcher and her students spent extra time and money doing supplemental reading material, but remained uncertain to what extent the exposure to outside reading will be sufficient. So do other colleagues and students.

Also serving as a senior high school teacher, the researcher discovers that two crucial problems concerning BCT bother her and her students. Poor grammar ability is the first one. Although nowadays language teaching has been shifted from grammar to reading comprehension, correct grammatical usage remains fundamentally essential

for advanced readings. Students appear to perform well on BCT reading comprehension, but actually their passive recognition ability in reading can only lead them to limited understanding of passages given. When asked about the details of an article, students have trouble figuring out grammatical points such as tense, passive voice, relative clause, or noun clause, which ought to be mastered in junior high school. Apparently, BCT fails to assess student's integrative competence.

The other problem resulted from student's bad habit of learning spelling and writing sentences. About half of her senior high school students have a difficulty memorizing a large amount of vocabulary and writing complete sentences. This happens because students have been used to passively choosing the correct answer when preparing for BCT. Picking up a correct answer is undoubtedly easier than spelling words or writing sentences, which requires more patience and energy. Even those students who are superior to at least 80% of the thirty thousand examinees tend to perform far better in multiple choices than in writing words or sentences. What's worse, students' bad learning habits and deficient training in English spelling and writing contribute to grave problems in senior high school English classes especially when these students plan to enter university three years later. According to Curriculum Standards of English Education for Junior High School, one of the three main general objectives is to cultivate students' correct learning habits in English. In

Testing in Language Programs, Brown (1996) also points out that tests can provide useful information for evaluating the effectiveness of students' study habits. It looks as if such basic abilities, spelling and writing included, are not judged completely from BCT.

In *Testing for language teachers*, Hughes (2003) points out that a test is said to have content validity if its content constitutes a representative sample of the language skills, structures etc. with which it is meant to be concerned. After students have taken the test, two gaps are likely to be spotted. One is between the teaching and testing (BCT), and the other exists between the students' performance at school and that on BCT. In other words, the BCT's content validity can be questioned. There exists a great body of studies, some of which discuss the effects of public examinations. For example, Chen (2002) studied the washback effect of BCT from teachers' perceptions, and Lin (2001) talked about the influential role of BCT in education. Other researchers discussed the relationships between public examinations and language instruction, such as Yu, K.S. (1993), who clarified the purpose of language test, and Chou (1997), who mentioned renovating evaluating process after the coming of new textbooks. However, to our great surprise, little empirical research has been conducted concerning the content validity of BCT. Even much-cited authority such as Lin, S. H. (2000) tends to make general statements about BCT rather than citing evidence from

specific studies. Hence, the scope of the test content and what the test items exactly measure are worthy of studying. Moreover, serving in both junior and senior high school, the researcher is eager to comprehend what the content validity of BCT is. By doing so, she can pave for her junior high school students a more effective way for BCT, and develop more confidence in what she teaches and evaluates. Also, she expects the result to show to what extent can students' ability be assessed by BCT, so that she can establish a more objective judgment to her senior high school students' English ability. Thus, this study is managed to investigate whether BCT tests what it claims to measure, that is, the content validity of the English BCT.

Research Questions

Specifically, present study addresses the following questions. Trying to bridge the gap between teaching and testing, the researcher designed the first research question: "To what degree does BCT match the curricular instruction for junior high school students?" Since the test itself is related not only to the test content, but also to students' academic performance, the researcher designed the second question to investigate the relationship between the test and academic performance: "To what degree is the students' performance at school related to the performance on BCT?" In addition, since teachers' attitude to the test's relation with instruction has an impact on

the test's validity, the researcher set the third question: "To what degree do the junior high school teachers think BCT matches the content domain the BCT Center claims to test?" (Henning, 1987) Three research questions correlate closely to one and another, seeking to investigate content validity of BCT.

To pertinently answer the above questions, the following sub-questions are designed:

- 1-1. How many items of the BCT do the junior high school teachers agree to be congruent with the content of textbooks?
- 1-2. How many items of the BCT do the junior high school teachers agree have been studied in English instruction at school?
- 1-3. How many items of the BCT do the junior high school teachers agree have been covered in school evaluation?
- 1-4. How many items of BCT do the junior high school teachers think are not difficult for hard-working examinees to answer?
- 2-1. What is the distribution of students' academic scores in the three years at a junior high school?
- 2-2. What is the distribution of students' BCT raw scores?
- 2-3. Is there a relationship between the academic scores and the BCT raw scores?

- 3-1. To what degree do junior high school teachers think BCT matches the general overall objectives of the Curriculum Standards?
- 3-2. To what degree do junior high school teachers think BCT matches the specific objectives of the Curriculum Standards?
- 3-3. To what degree do junior high school teachers think BCT matches the principles the BCT Center claims to follow?
- 3-4. To what degree do the junior high school teachers think that BCT matches the Core Competence Indicators of BCT?

Research Design

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses are adopted in this study. While the data for qualitative analysis are collected via survey questionnaires providing subjective opinions from junior high school teachers, the quantitative analysis is intended to investigate the correlation between students' performance on BCT and their academic performance at school.

Definition of Terms

The following are the operational definitions of the key terms mentioned in this thesis.

Criterion-referenced Test

Glaser (1963) presents a general definition for a criterion-referenced test (CRT):

Criterion-referenced tests indicate the content of the behavioral repertory, and the correspondence between what an individual does and the underlying continuum of achievement. Tests, which assess student achievement in terms of a certain criterion standard, thus provide information as to the degree of competence attained by a particular student, which is independent of reference to the performance of others (p.519).

The researcher would define BCT as a CRT owing to the test purpose set for BCT. That is, the BCT items are developed based on Curriculum Standards and written to fit with the course objectives in order to assess students' achievement during the three school years. This study adopts the first edition of BCT of English Subject in 2003, in which year 298,049 examinees out of the 313,239 junior high school graduates participated in the test.

Curriculum Standards (國民中學課程標準)

The BCT Center announces that the specified domain of English subject would cover textbooks from Volume 1 to Volume 5, which is written according to the Curriculum Standards issued by the Ministry of Education in 1994. In the Curriculum Standards, general goals and specific objectives of English teaching and learning are set; teaching materials and instruction time management are regulated; and instructions and evaluations of grammar, vocabulary, and reading are recommended as

well.

Core Competence Indicators (基本學力指標)

Before the BCT Center implemented the test in 2001, the Committee of the Basic Competence Test for Junior High School Students had provided model test items to educate people involved in (2000). The Core Competence Indicators here refer to the fourteen competence indicators announced by the Committee, rather than the Academic Attainment Indicators (學力指標) or Competence Indicators (能力指標) concerning the Nine-year Curriculum.

Academic Scores (在校段考成績)

The academic score means the average score of 17 monthly tests (three tests for the first five semesters and two for the last one) at school. Therefore, grades on class participation, learning attitude, and assignment are excluded. The monthly tests are assumed to represent the content domain of the textbooks being tested in different periods of a semester.

Significance of the Study

The study studies content validity of BCT. It investigates to what extent Basic

Competence Test (BCT) covers a representative sample of the content the tester claims to measure. It is hoped that this study would promote better understanding for the content validity of BCT. It is particularly significant because teachers and students are eagerly looking for more information concerning the nature and quality of the test items. Through qualitative and quantitative research, this study could serve as a practical guide. For educators, this study could help them decide if BCT meets the nation's educational objectives and improve the development of teaching materials. For the BCT Center, this study offers an evaluation of BCT. At the school level, this study could help teachers pay attention to teaching to the Curriculum Standards and provide useful information for students who will be taking the test. Finally this study could help the public understand better the kind of English language ability measured by the test.