

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This study is aimed to explore senior high school English teachers' beliefs about reading instruction and to investigate the relationship between their beliefs and practices. In this chapter, the background of the study is presented first, followed by the purpose of the study. The significance of the study and research questions of the study are stated in the following sections.

Background of the Study

It is undeniable that teaching in Taiwan is still guided by testing, although the reformation of the educational system has been put into practice for years. In their course of study, students have to take and pass all kinds of tests and examinations to earn their diplomas. To enter a college, students, who had to take Joint College Entrance Examination in the past, now have had multiple ways to get admitted. They can choose to take Scholastic Academic Test and/or Department Required Test. Reading ability is highly emphasized in both tests. To perform well in these tests, students need to do a lot of reading to improve their reading ability. Therefore, how senior high school English teachers instruct reading is worthy of being studied.

In conducting reading instruction, teachers may adopt the bottom-up/text-based approach (Gough, 1972; LaBerge & Samuels, 1985), the top-down/reader-based approach (Clarke, 1979; Goodman, 1967), or the interactive approach (Carrell 1984; Silberstein, 1987). In a typical text-based class, teachers spend most of the time elaborating on vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, sentence patterns, and grammar. They teach students to decode words in isolation and then decode words in sentences

to get the meaning out of the text. More often than not, teachers translate the text to help students comprehend the surface meaning. However, even though students know every word and every sentence, they still fail to get the gist and cannot fully understand what the writer intends to convey in the text (Bernhardt, 1991; Widdowson, 1979). In a typical reader-based class, instead of making explicit vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammar, teachers either provide students with necessary cultural background knowledge or activate students' prior knowledge to enhance their reading comprehension (Clarke, 1979; Widdowson, 1983). They teach students to apply such reading skills as skimming, scanning, and guessing to comprehend the text. They encourage students to interpret the text in their own way. In a typical interactive class, teachers teach students to alternate between reader-based and text-based processing to check and restructure their comprehension of the text (Carrell, 1984b; Silberstein, 1987). They also encourage students to employ textual clues and background knowledge to recreate the meaning of the text. They make explicit only the vocabulary and grammar that hinder reading comprehension.

What approaches teachers adopt in their classroom reflects their thoughts, instructional planning, and instructional decision-making, namely, their beliefs. The field of research on teaching English as a second or foreign language has recognized the importance of language teachers' beliefs in language teaching and indicated that second language teachers' beliefs have an impact on their teaching (Johnson, 1994; Woods, 1996). Educational theories and empirical studies have demonstrated that teachers' beliefs influence teaching considerably (Calderhead, 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Richardson, 1996), and further influence students'

learning (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Fang, 1996). Teachers' beliefs and their actions influence each other (Clark & Peterson, 1986), and teachers' actions affect students' learning actions and achievements, which in turn stimulate teachers to reflect on their actions and further adjust their existing beliefs.

Many studies have been conducted to explore the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices (e.g., Deford, 1985; Johnson, 1994). Dobson and Dobson (1983) stated that belief-practice congruency is important for good teaching. Likewise, Nien (2002) suggested that the consistency between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices plays a critically important role in effective teaching. However, inconsistency almost always occurs between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices although it is not expected (Schon, 1983). The discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices has an effect on teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

Many researchers advocate that reading is an interaction between the reader and the text through reading skills, and that successful reading depends on many skills working together during the reading process (e.g., Aebersold & Field, 1997; Brown, 2001; Chern, 1994). The reader's role in the reading process is active rather than passive. The reader acts as an active information processor instead of a mere text decoder (Coady, 1979). Teachers can employ different approaches and conduct various activities to enhance students' reading ability and help students gain a better understanding of the text.

As teaching in Taiwan is still guided by testing and as reading ability is still the

focus of Scholastic Academic English Test and Department Required English Test, senior high school English teachers are faced with the challenge of arousing students' interest in reading and assisting students to read more efficiently and more effectively. The current English curriculum is designed on the basis of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, and the learning of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns serves the function of communication. Whether teachers possess particular beliefs and how they conduct instructional practices, therefore, need to be explored. Thus, this study is intended to explore senior high school English teachers' beliefs, the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices, and the factors that cause the discrepancy, if any, so that teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes can be improved.

Significance of the Study

In Taiwan, there have been a growing number of studies on language teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Some of the studies were conducted through questionnaires (e.g., Chang, 2001; Chen, 2003; Liao, 2004), others were conducted through questionnaires and interviews (e.g., Chung, 2008; Lai, 2004), and still others were conducted through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations (e.g., Hsieh, 2002; Wang, 2007; Wu, 2002). Since beliefs could not be directly observed or measured, beliefs had to be inferred from what people said, intended, and did (Pajares, 1992). Studies conducted through questionnaires or interviews could elicit language teachers' beliefs. However, these studies could not truly reveal language teachers' classroom practices, and might fail to fully reflect the relationship between language teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. It seems that more studies are needed

to explore teachers' thought processes qualitatively. Hence, this study employed a questionnaire, open-ended interviews, and classroom observations to explore senior high school English teachers' beliefs and their practices, the relationship between beliefs and practices, and the factors influencing the relationship between them. Suggestions were also provided for senior high school English teachers to find a balance between their beliefs and practices and enhance teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes.

Research Questions

This study is aimed to address the following questions:

- (1) What are senior high school English teachers' beliefs about reading instruction?
- (2) How is reading instruction delivered?
- (3) What are the factors, if any, that may influence the practices of reading instruction?