

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter, the research questions that were answered in the previous chapter were discussed. The discussion was done based on the existing literature and the results of this study. It followed the order of the three research questions. First, teachers' beliefs and practices in writing instruction were discussed together. Second, the consistency between the beliefs and practices and the possible reasons for the inconsistency were considered. Third, background factors found to be related to teachers' beliefs and practices were looked at.

In addition, implications were presented to help refine senior high school English writing instruction. Suggestions were made for English teachers, teacher education institutes, the Ministry of Education, and writing instruction material designers.

Though this study has attempted to offer some information on senior high school English teachers' beliefs and practices in writing instruction, there were certain limitations. The limitations were pointed out toward the end of this chapter and suggestions for future research were made to deal with the limitations.

5.1 Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study are discussed in the order of the three research questions.

5.1.1 Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

In this section, teachers' beliefs and practices in writing instruction are discussed. There are four issues involved: (1) goals of writing instruction, (2) teachers' roles in

general, (3) content of writing instruction, and (4) teaching procedures. As indicated in chapter four, the goals of writing instruction were to learn the structure of English writing and to be able to express in English. The goals were combined with the need to meet the demands of the entrance exams, either consciously or unconsciously. As for roles teachers played, they played the roles of facilitators in pre-writing and while-writing processes, and played the roles of judges or advisors in evaluating students' compositions. In addition, the content and teaching procedures of writing instruction were based on principles of both product-oriented and process-oriented approaches.

To begin with, according to the results from the questionnaires, teachers tended to hold the beliefs that the goals of writing instruction were to enable students to express in English and to make students become familiar with English textual patterns. Speaking of the goal of preparing students for the college entrance exams, teachers did not show as much agreement. However, contrary to the results in the questionnaires, most interviewed teachers taught students based on the standards of the entrance exams. They taught the modes that were usually tested, such as narration and description, but rarely dealt with exposition and argumentation, which were rarely included in the tests. The number of words required for students' compositions, 120 to 150 words, also showed the teachers' concern about the requirements of the exams. In addition, the rating scales of composition evaluation reflected this test-oriented goal, too.

With the entrance exams approaching, the test-oriented trend seems to be inevitable. This situation resonates with Kao's (2002) ethnographic case study on one senior high school in Taipei County and Hsu's (2005) study on five senior high schools in Kaohsiung. Kao (2002) found that "the college entrance exam in Taiwan

profoundly influenced all aspects of the teaching of EFL writing,” including “classroom practices, teaching materials, writing assignments, marking and revising process, foci of teaching English writing, grading criteria, and the beliefs and attitudes of teachers” (p. 210). Actually, it is quite normal that teachers would like their students to be able to get high grades in the college entrance exams. What must be noted was that the teachers did not think of passing the exams as the only goal. Interviewee ID 3 stimulated his students to look beyond the entrance exams. After all, the exams were not an end of English learning, they were just a process. In fact, interview results further reassured the importance of the goals to express in English and to learn the structure of English writing. Furthermore, other goals were on the teachers’ mind, too. For example, interviewee ID 2 also mentioned the need to train students to think critically and do research on any given topic. He was unhappy to see many of his students writing clichés, using similar diction and story. These mixed goals served as the basis of writing instruction.

Second, as for the roles teachers played in writing instruction, based on the questionnaire data, the roles of facilitators or guides were considered necessary but were only practiced from time to time. That is, they thought they should interact with students and offer them feedback in writing instruction but they did not always do so. As Brown (2001) revealed, to assist students in developing their own ideas, offering their own critical analysis, and finding their own “voice,” teachers must play the roles of facilitators and coaches instead of authoritative directors and arbiters. In addition, the interview data revealed that teachers did not play only one role all the time, which seems to coincide with what Brown (2001) suggested. He pointed out that “Teachers can play many roles in the courses of teaching. Just as parents are called upon to be many things to their children, teachers cannot be satisfied with only one role” (p. 166).

The roles the interviewees voiced could be organized into two directions. One was the roles of guides or facilitators, and the other was the roles of judges or advisors. After all, in different stages of writing instruction, roles should vary. In guiding students to generate their ideas, a more facilitative role is needed to accompany them in their writing process, while in evaluating students' final works, a more authoritative role is needed to tell students the directions to work toward.

Third, the content of writing instruction, according to the questionnaire and interview results, teachers believed that the format, structure, modes of English writing should be included in the curriculum. What is more, pattern practices and translation practices were beneficial to learning writing. Outline drafting was also one important part of the teaching content. However, the teachers did not necessarily think that students should memorize some common expressions, such as "It goes without saying that..." and "The importance of so-and-so cannot be over emphasized." Teachers had some reservation toward students' memorizing and then writing too many common expressions because the products students produced might be simple words combined with formal language, which was awkward, as interviewee ID 3 pointed out. The questionnaire items probing teachers' practices revealed that in terms of content of writing instruction, the results of beliefs and practices were pretty consistent.

The content of writing instruction mentioned above was distributed into three years of teaching in senior high school. English writing is not included in the Basic Competence Test, so teachers, as well as students, do not think of writing as a focus in junior high school. After students enter senior high school, it is always their first time to look at English rhetorical conventions and get to know them. For those beginners, the interviewed teachers did not ask them to write English essays in the freshman year.

Instead, students were exposed to extensive reading material, from which they could get a glimpse of English writing structure. The connection between reading and writing has been agreed on by many scholars (Brown, 2001; Chen, 1998; Hall & Birkerts, 1994; Huang, 1996; Raimes, 1998; Zamel, 1992). The reason might be that by reading and studying related material, students would be able to know what the subject matter is about and how to write about it (Brown, 2001). Additionally, sentence patterns, translation practices, and questions and answers were included in the first-year curriculum. In the junior year, in addition to getting more used to English writing structure, students were demanded to write fragments, paragraphs, or even essays. In the senior year, students were asked to do simulated writing practices to prepare for the entrance exams. During this period, essays were written in limited time. To make the practices seem more like the entrance exams, the teachers usually did not allow students to resort to any reference in the writing process.

Regarding the teaching resources for teachers, the interviewees collected material from various channels. They thought no textbook, either at home or abroad, could possibly cover all the issues they would like to deal with. One interviewee even cooperated with her colleagues on compiling their own textbooks for publication in that school. Although looking for teaching material is a tiresome job, doing this enables teachers to teach based on their students' levels and needs.

Fourth, issues regarding teaching procedures include free writing, group discussion, teacher evaluation, peer evaluation, self-evaluation, revision, and presentation.

In the pre-writing and while-writing processes, free writing and brainstorming in groups are the two important issues. As suggested by Cooper and Patton (2001), free writing by individual and brainstorming by group allow students to generate as many

ideas as possible. The idea of free writing, according to Sokolik (2003), is that “students write on any topic they want for a specified period of time, without concern for grammar, spelling, or punctuation” (p. 90). The purpose is to make students more comfortable with the writing process and thus be more capable of experimenting with ideas. However, teacher respondents in this study did not show much agreement toward free writing. They were afraid that students’ might get used to writing whatever they wanted with little structure. To tackle this problem, maybe teachers can ask students to organize their thoughts in the process or later. Though teacher respondents had doubts about free writing, they thought brainstorming in groups benefited students even though they did not frequently do so. A look at the interview results revealed a different result. Most of the interviewees guided students to brainstorm in groups. Those skipping the process of brainstorming in groups might be under the pressure of limited time.

In the post-writing process, issues of evaluation, revision, and presentation are involved. Evaluation may come from teachers, peers, or students themselves. The questionnaire results showed that teachers highly valued the roles of peer evaluation and self-evaluation. Nevertheless, most of the time only teacher evaluation was included. Sometimes teachers directly corrected the errors for students, and other times, they just pointed out directions for improvement. The latter form of evaluation might prevent teachers from over-correction, which could be discouraging for students (Harmer, 1998). The rating scales were based on the requirements of the entrance exams; that is, content and organization were valued most, followed by grammar, diction and mechanics. Interview responses indicated that peer evaluation was put aside because of students’ insufficient abilities and time limit. The teachers thought that students were still unfamiliar with English writing, and therefore lacked

the abilities to evaluate their classmates' works. This kind of thinking made them reluctant to "waste" the precious time on this activity. A look at the literature offered another insight. In fact, many scholars have advocated the guided, scaffolded use of peer feedback in L2 writing instruction (Brown, 2001; Huang & Tang, 1997; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Hansen & Liu, 2005; Nelson, 1995; Raimes, 1983; Stanley, 1992). There are guiding principles to follow before, during and after the process to increase the effectiveness of peer response (Hansen & Liu, 2005). On the other hand, self-evaluation was not encouraged by the interviewees because of students' low levels and the blindness to one's own mistakes. Actually, similar to peer review, with proper guidance and training, students can serve as their own evaluators, too.

After the evaluation, revision is another important part of post-writing. According to Winterowd and Murray (1985), "revising a composition involves seeing it again by rereading it, and then making the necessary changes to improve it" (p. 16). Most of the respondents had positive attitude toward the need for students to rewrite compositions after teacher evaluation, but due to limited time, they might not always be able to put it into practice. Fortunately, the interviewees did ask students to rewrite. Depending on the writing stages, students had to rewrite the outlines, drafts, and the final essays.

After students finish their compositions, teachers can pick some outstanding works and present to the whole class in order to show students what nice works mean and push students to work harder in order to be picked. The teacher respondents in this study thought they should offer students channels for presentation, but seldom spared time to do that. However, five out of the six interviewees gave students chances to present their compositions by doing oral or written presentation. Here is an interesting contrast between questionnaire and interview results. The reason might be

that those willing to take part in the interviews had beliefs and behaviors different from those not willing. The teachers that demanded that students do oral presentation had the idea that speaking and writing skills were connected, which was supported by Blanton (1992) and Weissberg (1994). Written presentation is more common than oral presentation in presenting students' compositions. Sometimes teachers in this study copied and then pasted students' works on the bulletin boards for the whole class to read, and other times, they copied them and gave each student one hard copy. To solidify the effects of presentation, sometimes teachers even pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the picked compositions. Whatever the ways of presenting students' works are, teachers should help students understand that "writing is a social action" and that "their work is inherently intended for others to read" (Williams, 1998, p. 66)

All in all, the researcher started with the interest in taking a glimpse at senior high school writing instruction and to see if it was more product-oriented or process-oriented. However, the results from chapter four showed that principles or activities of both orientations were born in mind and included in the instruction. Grammatical forms and rhetorical forms were included, which reflected the product-oriented approach. What is more, group discussion and multiple drafts revealed the process-oriented approach. In other words, not only did teachers value the final products students produce, but they also cared about the composing process. This seems to disagree with Chao's (1998) research about high school teachers, which reported teachers as teaching specifically with product-oriented principles. What is more, the results generated from this study also resonate with what Lockhart (1996) found in the study of Hong Kong secondary schools English teachers. The teachers were flexible in their orientations instead of following one single approach.

5.1.2 Consistency Issue between Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

In this section, the level of consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices is probed. As the results in chapter four revealed, the inconsistency was mostly in ideas of the process-oriented approach, such as the facilitative roles of teachers, group discussion, peer evaluation and self-evaluation. Teachers encountered difficulties regarding the curriculum, students, teaching preparation, and composition evaluation. The difficulties might have resulted in the inconsistency.

Overall, teachers' practices in writing instruction tended to reflect their beliefs, and this seems to match the literature stated in chapter two about connection between beliefs and practices. Beliefs have effects on teachers' classroom practices, and sometimes the relationship is reciprocal (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). However, not all beliefs were put into practice. Sometimes teachers had strong beliefs toward one concept, but somehow did not act accordingly. In this study, inconsistency between beliefs and practices existed in the roles of the teachers and teaching procedures. Teachers strongly believed that they should play the roles of facilitators, interacting with students and giving them feedback, but they did not always do so. Inconsistency also appeared in issues of group discussion, peer evaluation, self-evaluation, and presentation. Regarding these issues, teachers also had strong agreement, but did not adopt the ideas in their teaching very often.

Teachers hold certain beliefs toward writing instruction. Sometimes they may be given opportunities to follow their own beliefs to teach, but other times there may be constraints that prevent them from behaving according to their beliefs (Clark & Peterson, 1986). In this study, the constraints or the difficulties teachers faced were organized into four dimensions: (1) curriculum, (2) students' motivation and

proficiency level, (3) material selection, compilation, and teaching preparation, and (4) composition evaluation.

First, most of the teachers revealed that the school authorities arranged the course of English writing in the senior year, which was too late. What is more, the class hours were not sufficient enough. They could not teach writing properly in just one year. Luckily, the interview results showed that most teachers rearranged the curriculum according to their teaching beliefs. They taught writing step by step from the freshman year or the junior year on. Another problem teachers pointed out was that they had so many students that they could not respond to their writing in detail or hold teacher-student conferences to tackle students' writing problems.

Second, speaking of students' motivation, teachers indicated that their students' intention was mostly to get higher grades in the entrance exams, which proved that entrance exams did play a role, as stated in Kao's (2002) study. Speaking of students' proficiency level, teachers used the word "low." There were problems in content, organization, diction, and grammar.

Third, to teach the students described above, teachers looked for material and prepared for teaching. In spite of the seemingly abundant textbooks, foreign or local, to choose from, teachers in this study could not find "one" suitable textbook. This left teachers no choice but to collect material from a variety of sources and even compiled them, which took teachers much time. However, it must be noted that this difficulty might benefit their students, for teachers could offer material based on the students' levels and needs.

Fourth, teachers faced problems concerning teacher evaluation. To begin with, responding and grading students' works was time-consuming. In addition, students' errors were numerous. Also, the effects of teacher evaluation were unknown. Maybe

that was why Chen (2000) found that most composition teachers wished to teach other courses.

Though senior high school English teachers involved in this study tried hard to teach their students English writing, certain obstacles from the environment sometimes prevented them from teaching in accordance with their beliefs. There is a need for teachers, the school authorities, and the Ministry of Education to work together to cope with those difficulties in order that teachers can do their best in their writing instruction.

5.1.3 Factors Related to Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

In this section, the third research question is discussed. Every teacher has his or her set of beliefs and unique way of teaching. Nevertheless, previous studies showed that teachers with similar background experiences tended to have certain tendency (Chang, 2005; Chang, 1998; Lai, S. J., 2004; Lin, 1990; Tang, 1993). Therefore, in this study, background information of the questionnaire respondents was considered in analyzing the questionnaire results. It was found that the following five factors influenced teachers' beliefs or practices: gender, age, years of teaching, workshop attendance experience, and knowledge about the guidelines of writing instruction.

The first factor that significantly affected teachers' beliefs and practices is gender. Compared with female teachers, male teachers were more likely to hold the belief that the goal of writing instruction was to prepare students for the college entrance exams. Also, they tended to regard outline drafting as one necessary element of the instruction. In addition, they thought they should encourage students to explore ideas and leave trivial parts, such as spelling, grammatical mistakes, and punctuation, for later correction. What is more, they provided students with model essays with clear

textual patterns more often than female counterparts. However, they had less agreement with the teachers' roles of facilitators.

The second factor that influenced teachers' beliefs and practices was age. Teachers younger than 30 or 41 to 50 years old expressed more agreement with the statement that the goal of writing instruction was to make students familiar with English textual patterns. It seems that new teachers and experienced teachers laid more emphasis on English writing structure. As for practices, those that are 41 to 50 years of age introduced more frequently the format of English writing.

The third factor that influenced teachers' beliefs and practices was years of teaching. Teachers that had teaching experience of fewer than 5 years expressed more agreement than those that had taught for 6 to 10 years with the statement that the goal of writing instruction was to familiarize students with English textual patterns. This seems to coincide with the result of the second factor that new teachers stressed more on English writing structure. The reason might be that the new teachers were taught this in college and still had fresh ideas. Years of teaching also affected teachers' practices. Those with 16 to 20 years of teaching experience asked students to rewrite their composition after teacher evaluation more frequently than those with only 6 to 10 years of experience.

The fourth factor was workshop attendance experience, which influenced teachers' practices. Those that had taken part in workshops about writing instruction in the past three years were more likely to play the roles of facilitators, interacting with students and giving them feedback in writing instruction. The reason might be that the facilitative roles were emphasized in the workshops.

The fifth factor that influenced teachers' practices was knowledge about the guidelines for teaching writing. Compared with teachers with no knowledge about the

guidelines, those knowing about but not following the guidelines more frequently required their students to rewrite after teacher evaluation. Actually, the teachers that were aware of the guidelines might have unconsciously digested some of the ideas in the guidelines.

The first three factors, gender, age, years of teaching, are pre-determined and cannot be changed, but teachers can refer to the results to get an idea of the tendency and further make advance in teaching writing. The other two factors, workshop experience and knowledge about the guidelines, can be worked on. It seems to suggest that taking part in workshops on writing instruction might have positive effects on the formation of facilitative roles, one feature of the process-oriented approach. Making known the guidelines of writing instruction set by the MOE might also promote another feature of the process-oriented approach, revision.

5.2 Implications

English teachers in senior high schools are getting to know more about the ideas of process-oriented approach, as shown from the results of this study. However, constraints from four dimensions, curriculum, students, teaching preparation, and teacher evaluation, have prevented them from putting the ideas into practice.

One of the constraints was from the curriculum. Many schools still postponed writing instruction to the third year, which was believed by many teachers to be too late. The Ministry of Education should see to it that composition courses start in the freshman year and progress in the junior and senior years, with at least two class hours per week. What is more, many teachers complained that the number of students in each class was so large that they could not bear to deal with each student's writing in detail. For example, they could not but omit teacher-student conferences due to

limited time and energy. To improve this situation, the Ministry of Education is advised to reduce English teachers' required teaching hours or minimize the number of students in each class.

Another obstacle was students' low motivation and low level. Teachers revealed that students agreed to learn English writing mostly due to the need to get better grades in the entrance exams. After all, the grades had influences on their application to colleges they would like to go to. In addition, teachers regarded students as low-leveled with regard to English writing. It is teachers' responsibility to work on students' motivation and capabilities. For one thing, the reason why students had such low motivation might be that they wrote just to be tested. To cope with this problem, teachers can design real-life situations for students to practice writing. For instance, to motivate students to write, interviewee ID 1 cooperated with one teacher abroad in teaching English writing. That foreign class wanted to learn Chinese, while the teacher's class intended to learn English. Therefore, they wrote letters per month back and forth, in English and in Chinese respectively for students in both classes to practice and teach. This activity did not increase burden on the teacher, for she did not have to correct anything in the process. She offered this chance for students to write freely. For another, it is reasonable that students are unfamiliar with English writing, which was not the focus of junior high school. It is teachers' jobs to elevate their writing abilities in the senior high school years.

Still another problem was about teaching preparation. Teachers had concerns about not being able to find one textbook that was suitable for their students and designed for weekly composition instruction. Therefore, they were forced to spend a large amount of time looking for appropriate material from a variety of sources. To help solve this problem, writing instruction material designers should cooperate with

high school teachers to design textbooks for teachers to refer to.

The other problem was about teacher evaluation. Teachers had many classes to teach, and thus numerous compositions to respond to and grade. Besides, students were asked to write outlines and multiple drafts, and this meant that for each topic, teachers had to respond to each student's writing more than once. Without doubt, students made many errors for teachers to comment on. All these added together gave teachers constant nightmares. Actually teachers can give peer evaluation and self-evaluation a try to compensate for limited time and energy. However, it should be kept in mind that students do not automatically know how to do these kinds of evaluation. Teachers should take some time to instruct students on the ways to do them.

In addition to constraints, there are opportunities that might assist teachers in forming stronger beliefs or realizing them. In this study, workshop experiences and knowledge about the guidelines of writing instruction were two influential factors.

One of the most important findings of this study was that workshop attendance on writing instruction benefited senior high school English teachers in adopting a more process-oriented teaching style. It is advised that teacher education institutes offer more in-service training courses or seminars for teachers to participate in. In this way, teachers can upgrade their writing skills as well as instruction techniques.

Another important finding was that knowledge about the guidelines for writing instruction helped teachers follow the principles of process-oriented approach. To make the best of this opportunity, the Ministry of Education is supposed to offer seminars that explain the guidelines and offer practical activities to put the principles into practice. For example, how to do peer evaluation or self-evaluation and how to evaluate students' compositions more effectively can be included.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

Although this study has attempted to provide some insights of senior high school English teachers' beliefs and practices in writing instruction, it has several limitations.

First, due to limited time and resources, the target group was only senior high school English teachers in Taipei city. 199 questionnaires were distributed and 171 returned. Also, only six interviews were conducted, which might not be enough to represent the population. Thus, caution must be taken before the results are generalized to other teachers in Taipei city. In addition, this study is not a large-scale study including teachers in every city. Therefore, the results may not be able to be generalized to teachers teaching in other parts of Taiwan.

Second, the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees were not selected from random sampling. The respondents were drawn from the population through convenient sampling. They were chosen because they happened to be contacted, not because they best represented the population. Moreover, at the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in the follow-up interview. The background information of those answering yes was looked at and then the interviewees were picked by the researcher. This group of volunteers might possess different views from those not willing to do the interviews.

Third, the research methodologies of this study were questionnaires and interviews, which were only written and oral report of the teachers' perceived teaching beliefs and practices. On the one hand, there is no knowing whether they voiced their true beliefs. Questionnaire items and interview questions were predetermined and directed by the researcher. The respondents and the interviewees might be guided to give out the answers the researcher expected. On the other hand,

how they really taught in their classrooms was also unknown. What teachers said they did might not be equal to how they actually behaved in their classrooms.

Finally, this study concentrated on the beliefs and practices of teachers' writing instruction. Students' viewpoints toward the learning of English writing and toward their teachers' instruction were not involved.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the limitations of this study, the following suggestions were made for further research. First, more interviews can be conducted to gather more qualitative data. More teachers from the northern, central, southern, and eastern parts of Taiwan can be included to reflect the situations of a larger population. Second, participants of questionnaires and interviews can be picked through random sampling to ensure that they can represent the targeted population. Third, apart from questionnaires and interviews, to get to know teachers' classroom teaching, researchers can include classroom observations as one of the research methodologies. Fourth, a broader view of writing instruction in Taiwan senior high school can be acquired through a study of students' beliefs in learning to write English composition. If possible, comparison and contrast between teachers' beliefs and students' beliefs should be done.