

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Four skills include listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. For high school students in Taiwan, reading and writing are tested in the college entrance exams, namely, the Scholastic Achievement Test and the Department-required English Test. Therefore, their practical need is, at least, to read and write effectively. However, the high school entrance exam, that is, the Basic Competence Test, did not test English writing, which misleads both teachers and students to overlook the importance of writing.

In fact, for Chinese, English writing is difficult and needs to be taught because English has a different inner logic and thought pattern from those of Chinese (Kaplan, 1966). English has a dominantly linear development with introduction, body, and conclusion. Some Oriental writing like Chinese writing, on the other hand, is marked by what may be called an approach by indirection. The development of the paragraph may be said to be “turning and turning in a widening gyre.” Such a development would strike English readers as “awkward and unnecessarily indirect” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 10).

Fortunately, English composition is an elective course in senior high school curriculum. There are even guidelines given by the MOE suggesting the goal, time allocated, teaching material, and teaching methods of English writing instruction (see Appendix A). Yet, to tell the truth, few teachers, including the researcher, pay attention to the guidelines. Instead, most teachers follow their own beliefs to teach, which may be based on past experience as learners and teachers, school practice, personality, and educational principles (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). These beliefs

may or may not be put into practice.

Research on English teaching used to focus mainly on observable behaviors such as students' achievement and teachers' teaching methods. Much attention was drawn to students' academic achievement and ways of improving it. What is more, in the course of the development of ESL or EFL writing instruction, there has been much controversy over whether product-oriented approach or process-oriented approach is the better one to choose. These kinds of debate have proved to be inadequate in understanding the whole picture of English teaching and learning processes. What is more urgent is to understand the thoughts underlying teachers' classroom practices. It is these thoughts, or beliefs, that guide them throughout their teaching process.

During the past two decades, more attention has been paid to probe teachers' thought processes (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Fang, 1996). That is because the crucial impact teachers' beliefs have on practices has been widely accepted (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Fang, 1996; Johnson, 1994; Nespor, 1987). Johnson (1994) pointed out the significance of studying teachers' beliefs. First of all, teachers' beliefs influence both perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect how they act in the classroom. Second, teachers' beliefs play a pivotal role in how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and in how that information is transformed into classroom practices. Third, understanding teachers' beliefs is beneficial in improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs. Actually, the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices is reciprocal (Clark & Peterson, 1986). In other words, the beliefs teachers hold affect their actions, which in turn have an impact on their beliefs.

In Taiwan, there are quite a few studies exploring teachers' beliefs and even their influences on practices (Chang, 2003; Chang, 2004; Chang, 2005; Chen, 2005; Chiou,

2003; Chung, 2003; Hsieh, 2005; Hsieh, 2002; Kuo, 2004; Lai, S. J., 2004; Lai, Y. J., 2004; Liao, 2003; Lin, 2003; Liu, 2004; Lu, 2003; Nien, 2002; Wu, 2002). The research targets ranged from elementary to college level. The focus covered beliefs and practices in teachers' instruction and from time to time students' viewpoints. The most frequently adopted methodologies were questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations.

At the elementary school level, Hsieh (2002) investigated Taipei county teachers' beliefs about EFL learning. Another researcher, Lin (2003), did a study on teachers' beliefs and practices in phonics instruction. At the junior high school level, Chang (2005) collected information of teachers' beliefs and practices in listening instruction. Chen (2005) studied teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in vocabulary instruction. Hsieh (2005) probed teachers' beliefs and practices in grammar instruction. At the senior high school level, Nien (2002) focused on one high school teacher's beliefs in general and their influence on classroom practice. Chang (2003) did a study on teachers' beliefs in choosing their teaching methodologies and students' expectations. Liao (2003) explored two English teachers' beliefs and practices towards Communicative Language Teaching. Chung (2003) investigated teachers' beliefs in material compilation, selection, and use. Chiou (2003) surveyed how teachers perceived and taught literature in their teaching of English. Some studies were done on both junior and senior high schools. For example, Wu's (2002) study was on high school trainees' theoretical orientations and practices toward reading instruction. In addition, Lai, S. J. (2004) looked at high school English teachers' beliefs in grammar instruction in Taiwan. At the college level, Lu (2003) did a case study of two university instructors of English on their beliefs and classroom assessment. Liu (2004) studied teachers' beliefs and strategies used in coping with

students' expectations in four-year technological colleges. These studies have recognized the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their instruction.

Nevertheless, despite the crucial role of writing in the English learning process, few studies were done on beliefs in writing instruction, and even fewer ones were done to investigate both beliefs and practices of high school English writing teachers (Chang, 2004; Kuo, 2004; Lai, Y. J., 2004). Chang's (2004) target subjects were technological and vocational school (TVES) teachers and students. He interviewed both of them and analyzed the EFL writing teachers' teaching beliefs and the students' perspectives on their current English writing classes in those schools. Lai, Y. J.'s (2004) study identified the beliefs of university English writing teachers about their roles as teachers and learners, as well as the influence of their beliefs on their English writing instruction. However, the results got from colleges cannot be directly applied to high schools, for the environment of writing instruction at high school level is drastically unlike that at tertiary level. High school students are faced with pressure of schoolwork and are required to meet the writing criteria set by the college entrance exams, while at college level, students, along with professors, are given more freedom to shape the writing courses the way they prefer. When it comes to senior high school English teachers, one researcher, Kuo (2004), surveyed the academic preparedness of Taiwan high school English teachers for the teaching of writing. She collected the teachers' opinions on teaching EFL writing, displayed their problems and further made suggestions for teacher education and development. Another researcher, Hsu (2005), focused on high school English teachers' beliefs as well as practices in writing instruction. His foci were on teachers' views of prior training, teaching methods, difficulties, and their beliefs of writing instruction. However, he did not deal with the consistency between beliefs and practices. Actually, the consistency between teachers'

beliefs and classroom practices seems to be a critical element of effective teaching, as Nien (2002) suggested. What is more, background factors related to teachers' beliefs and practices were left untouched. As Johnson (1994) and Richardson (1996) indicated, teachers' beliefs were formed depending on their background experiences. Understanding the influential background factors might benefit teachers in identifying the sources of their beliefs and then modifying their beliefs.

To better understand and refine English writing instruction in high school, researchers must explore English teachers' beliefs and practices. As Brophy and Good (1974) stated, a better understanding of teachers' belief system or conceptual base will significantly contribute to enhancing educational effectiveness. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate what beliefs high school teachers hold toward writing instruction and their practices of these beliefs. The beliefs discussed here included the goals of writing instruction, teachers' ideal concept as to the roles they should play, the content students should learn, and the teaching procedures they should include. As for information about their practices, the teachers were guided to reexamine their own teaching and share their experiences on the four dimensions, instruction goals, teachers' roles, content of writing instruction, and teaching procedures. The research further examined whether teachers' practices corresponded to their beliefs and the reasons for the inconsistency between beliefs and practices. In this way, teachers can reflect on their classroom practices and improve their teaching. According to the literature reviewed, personal experiences of teachers tended to influence their beliefs and, thus, practices (Martinez, 2000; Tseng, 1999). Therefore, how teachers with different backgrounds tended to hold beliefs and teach differently was examined.

It is hoped that this study can assist high school English teachers in exploring

their ideal ways of teaching and in examining their current teaching methods. Through the comparison between beliefs and practices, the teachers can detect the inconsistency and make efforts to bridge the gap between them, which will benefit not only themselves but also their students. Furthermore, through the examination of the relationship between the teachers' background information and their beliefs and practices, the factors influencing the formation of beliefs and their practices may be revealed.

