

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale of the Study

Research on teachers' beliefs, knowledge or cognition has grown rapidly over the past decades. Teachers' orientations are said to influence their instructional behaviors in classroom (e.g., Borg, 2003; Brousseau, Book & Byers, 1988; Calderhead, 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986). Teachers hold assumptions about teaching, learning, students or subject matter that help them act and respond to classroom situations (Calderhead, 1996). In the field of language teaching, a shift from outcome of learning to teaching and learning process has also seen the significance of teachers' cognition and beliefs (Crandall, 2000). A number of studies in the second or foreign language teaching research recently recognize as well that teachers' pedagogical system, like knowledge, beliefs or assumptions affect their instructional behaviors (e.g., Borg, 1998; Burns, 1996; Johnson, 1994; Smith, 1996; Woods, 1996). Teachers in ESL or EFL¹ learning classroom may naturally hold specific beliefs which guide their English instruction. While most research examines ESL or EFL teachers' general beliefs about pedagogical knowledge or decision-making in class, few focuses on specific curricular areas, like literacy teaching (Borg, 2003). Similarly in the domestic research of Taiwan, a good number of research has focused on EFL teachers' beliefs on general English teaching (e.g., Chang, B. L., 2000; Chang, L. Y., 2001; Lin, 2002), but inquiry of EFL teachers' beliefs about specific skills such as reading instruction is lacking (Wu, C. F., 2002; Wu, S. R., 2002).

Reading instruction, which has been widely regarded as an indispensable part of English education in Taiwan, deserves further investigation, particularly on its

¹ ESL is the acronym referring to English as a second language. EFL is the acronym referring to English as a foreign language.

relationship with teachers' pedagogical beliefs. Harste and Burke (1977) proposed that teachers have specific theoretical orientations toward reading instruction.

Aebersold and Field (1997) also included teachers' beliefs about the reading process as one of the factors that impact second/foreign language reading. For example, teachers may hold the belief that learning of vocabulary is critical to understanding an English reading passage and in turn design more vocabulary learning activities than other aspects of reading instruction, such as background introduction. Thus, as an individual teacher's belief is manifested in their reading instruction, it could affect students' reading development.

Indeed, reading may be considered significant in English education in Taiwan. Reading passages or dialogues have always played a prominent role in the construction of each unit in almost every version of junior high school English textbooks in Taiwan. For each unit of a textbook, there are typically reading passages related to the theme of the lesson (e.g., future plans or itineraries for a trip) before the grammar points (e.g., future tense) are introduced. In addition, reading comprehension questions account for a large amount in the Basic Competence Test designed to test junior high school graduates' English proficiency (Young, 2007). Since reading plays such a significant role in English learning and teaching in Taiwan, it can be expected that EFL teachers in this context will devise reading instructional activities according to their particular beliefs toward reading instruction.

Although teachers' beliefs are acknowledged to have an effect on their reading instruction and classroom practice, contextual factors, especially those related to students and the quality of students' interaction with the teacher could lead to inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and actions. As Borg said in 2003, classroom practices "do [did] not ultimately always reflect teachers' stated beliefs, personal theories, and pedagogical principles"(p.91), since parents, school, curriculum,

students or other contextual factors would hinder the realization of beliefs. Among these factors, students seem to play the most influential role. For example, Johnson (1992) listed eight categories of teachers' instructional beliefs, and half of them referred to the students' involvement and motivation, affective needs, understanding, language skills and ability. That is, language learners' limited language proficiency or class involvement is often taken into account in the teachers' decision-making process. Nien's (2002) study investigated one high school EFL teacher's beliefs and practices on communicative approaches, and found significance in student variables. The participating teacher explained that students' involvement, motivation or needs compromised her instructional perception and actions. What students say and do in the classroom, therefore, shows its stance on the realization of teachers' beliefs. There has been much research on teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in Taiwan, trying to explain the incongruence as contextual factors like school, prescribed curriculum, or students (e.g., Chang, B. L., 2000; Chang, L. Y., 2001; Chen, 2005; Hsieh, 2005; Lin, 2002). Nevertheless, the description of students' role in teachers' beliefs and classroom practices seems to be insufficient. How exactly teachers' beliefs and instructional decisions may be shaped by learners' perceived limited L2 proficiency as well as affective or social needs thus requires more qualitative investigations.

1.2 Purposes of the Study

The significance of reading instruction in junior high school English teaching and complexity of teacher-student interaction in the actualization of teachers' beliefs and implementation of classroom practice provides the need for the current study. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate two in-service junior high school English teachers' pedagogical beliefs about reading instruction and how their interaction with students will impact the teachers' realization of beliefs in classroom practices. In

addition to examining the teachers' reading instruction beliefs, the present study further investigates how the teachers deal with teacher-student interaction in different class contexts. It is hoped that the present study will provide more understanding of how teachers' beliefs are manifested in classroom reading instruction and derive more useful insights to improve in-class practices.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to inquire junior high school English teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in reading instruction, the following questions guide the current study.

- (1) What pedagogical beliefs do junior high school (JHS) English teachers hold toward reading instruction?
- (2) How are JHS English teachers' beliefs about reading instruction shaped in the classroom context?
- (3) How does students' involvement impact English teachers' pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices on reading instruction?

1.4 Definition of Terms

- (1) Junior high school EFL teachers

The participating teachers in the present study who are certified by the Ministry of Education (MOE) are currently teaching English at a public junior high school in Taiwan.

- (2) Teachers' pedagogical beliefs on reading instruction

Teachers' pedagogical beliefs about reading instruction refer to teachers' pedagogical assumptions, knowledge or principles about teaching of reading, which in turn influence their classroom practice in the present study.