

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Background of the Research

The 1970s saw the surge of research on teachers' cognitions. Due to the dissatisfaction of the behaviorist view of process-product approach to studying teaching and under the influence of the rise of cognitive psychology, research on teachers' cognitions has constituted a major inquiry in the study of teaching (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Calderhead, 1996). In the research on teachers' cognitions, teachers' thoughts and beliefs underlying their teaching practices are the youngest focus (Calderhead, 1996). Teachers' beliefs are defined as "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic materials to be taught (Kagan, 1992, p.65)". Thus, what teachers do in the classroom is influenced and guided by their beliefs.

Research on teachers' beliefs falls into two distinct categories: factors that influence teachers' beliefs (Brown & Rose, 1995; McDermott et al., 1995; Richards, 1998; Wood et al., 1990) and the relationship between beliefs and instructional practices (Marcelo, 1978; Dobson & Dobson, 1983; Mayer, 1985; Duffy & Anderson, 1989; Johnson, 1992; Brown & Rose, 1995; Graden, 1996). These studies of teachers' thoughts and beliefs have revealed one common assumption. Influenced and molded by various contextual or non-contextual factors, teachers' beliefs influence and guide their decisions and their actions in the classroom (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Clark & Peterson, 1986). Consequently, it is reasonable to infer that teachers' beliefs will inform everything they do in the classroom, including the assessment activities that teachers implement in the classrooms. Not only the types of assessment activities, but also the reasons why they are implemented are crucial to our understanding of assessment and teaching.

To understand classroom assessment, we have to start from defining the term "assessment". Assessment is not simply assigning grades or a decision of fail or pass

(Genesee and Upshur, 1998). Brookhart (1999) defines assessment as “gathering and interpreting information about student achievement (p.1)”. In her definition “student achievement” is defined as “level of attainment of learning goals in college courses (p.1)”, and it is assessed “through tests, classroom and take-home assignments and projects that students undertake to provide information about what they are learning (p.1)”. Besides, in *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics (2nd ed.)*, assessment is defined as “the measurement of the ability of a person or the quality or success of a teaching course, etc. (p.29)”.

The multiple functions of assessments are apparent in these definitions. Assessment is not only the judgment of students’ achievement, but also a tool through which teachers understand the effectiveness of their teaching. When assessments are implemented in classrooms, they help teachers to “...determine whether the pace of instruction is appropriate and whether their instructional objectives have been met (Stiggins, 1988, p.363)”. Any method or measure that helps achieve the above-mentioned goals can serve as tools of assessment. Various assessment tools of judging achievement, accordingly, can be placed along the spectrum of assessment. They range from informal, spontaneous classroom observations, quizzes, students’ assignments to more formal, highly-organized papers or standardized tests (Stiggins, 1991; Mavrommatis, 1997).

Other measures that inform teachers of the effectiveness and limitations of their teaching are also encompassed, including questionnaires, interviews, and personal communication with the students, among others (Stiggins, 1988; Stiggins, 1991; Eisenbach, Golich, & Curry, 1998).

The facilitative effects of classroom assessment on teachers’ instruction and learning are pointed out by some research (Stiggins, 1991; Eisenbach, Golich, & Curry, 1998; Brookhart, 1999; Guskey, 2003). Stiggins (1991) points out that the quality of classroom assessment is directly related to that of instruction and students’ learning. Thus, understanding classroom

assessment will help us know what may contribute to good teaching and effective learning. Since teachers' beliefs inform and guide the assessment they administer in the classroom, we must explore teachers' beliefs about assessment in order to have a deeper understanding of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Definition of Key Terms

To facilitate the discussion and the understanding of this study, two key terms need to be defined.

Teachers' beliefs: In this study, teachers' beliefs refer to teachers' theories and perspectives on pedagogy, learning, students, curriculum, the subject matter, assessment, their roles as a teacher, etc. These theories and perspectives serve as a basis of teachers' planning, implementation, and evaluation of instruction or assessment.

Classroom assessment: Classroom assessment refers to teachers' assessment practices in class through any assessment tool or activity to contribute to the understanding and judgment of students' achievement and their current learning situations. The instruments of classroom assessment range from informal ones such as comprehension questionings in the process of instruction (Stiggins, 1988; Stiggins, 1991; Mavrommatis, 1997), assignments, and observations (Salmon-Cox, 1981; Mavrommatis, 1997) to formal ones such as quizzes, term exams, group projects, or written reports. The information gathered from classroom assessment may, or may not, be graded.

Purpose of the Study

There is only very little literature on teachers' beliefs about assessment (Wu, 1999). The focuses of most research are teachers' preferred instruments for classroom assessment (Salmon-Cox, 1981; Stiggins & Bridgeford, 1985; Mavrommatis, 1997) and teachers' grading practices (Impara, Plake, & Fager, 1993; Brookhart, 1994). Almost no literature explores teachers' beliefs underlying their designing, implementing, and evaluating assessment.

In Taiwan, very few efforts have been devoted to searching the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom assessment. Wu (1999) did a qualitative research on the beliefs about assessment of a university instructor of statistics. No extant research focuses on English teachers' beliefs about assessment. To draw a more complete picture of teachers' beliefs and classroom assessment, this study explores the beliefs and practice of assessment by two university instructors of English.

Research Questions

On the basis of the aforementioned research, four research questions are formulated:

1. What are the two instructors' major assessment activities (e.g., unit quizzes, group discussions, composition writing, etc.) and their underlying beliefs?
2. What are the possible constraints and difficulties the instructors face when they implement assessments, and what are their coping strategies?
3. What are some of the follow-up activities the instructors may employ after assessments?
4. What are the possible differences in assessment between the two instructors?

In the next chapter, literature on teachers' beliefs and classroom assessment will be reviewed. The study adopts the qualitative approach, including interviews and classroom observations to understand both instructors' beliefs underlying their assessment activities. The methodology will be introduced in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, results of the interviews with the instructors and the analysis of the observation data of the instructors'

assessment practices will be presented. In Chapter Five, the instructors' beliefs about assessment, their assessment practices, and the relationship between the two will be discussed. In the last chapter, suggestions for the field of educational research will be posed based on the findings and the discussion of the study.

