CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Motivation

The East Asian island state of Taiwan is internationally recognized for its economic endeavors. According to a 2007 World Bank assessment, Taiwan was quoted to rank 19th worldwide in terms of knowledge-based economic competitiveness (GIO, 2007c). Policymakers and scholars examining the Taiwanese economic miracle, questions how and why Taiwan has prosper (Breznitz, 2005). Among these factors, the role and influence of education is widely viewed as a key to the nation’s modernization (GIO, 2007b).

As the island state engages more centrally as a player in the global economic stage (Mok, 2005; Zaharia & Gilbert, 2005), the trend of English as an international language becomes an increasingly important element for the education of Taiwan students. In its role as a global language, English has become one of the most important academic and professional tools (Schutz, 2006). Therefore, great importance is emphasized in the finding of an effective way in teaching English to Taiwan’s students.

In addition, English language education has been a compulsory part of secondary schooling (junior high school) in Taiwan since 1968. Starting 2001, English was introduced at the elementary level of Grade 5, and later on in 2005, the Ministry of Education (MOE) decided that all the elementary school students started to learn English from third grade (GIO, 2007a; Oladejo, 2005).
In Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson (1985) report on the commission of reading entitled; “Becoming a Nation of Readers”, they mentioned: “Reading is a basic life skill. It is a cornerstone for a child’s success in schools, and indeed, throughout life. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success will be lost.”

However teachers in Taiwan have been confronting several difficulties in teaching English at elementary schools. As a first grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher (EFLT) for more than four years in Taiwan, the researcher believed that teachers should be resolute in providing the best instruction which would enable students to become fluent and competent readers of English. Therefore as a language researcher and practitioner in this present study attained to reach understanding of factors that are involved in Taiwanese students’ English reading development.

In addition to attending English classes, many students particularly in the metropolitan areas, take English courses at cram schools, which are independent after-school learning establishments (Her, 2007). Parents in Taiwan are willing to sacrifice their financial for they believed that by sending kids to an expensive language school; consisting of a local teacher and an English-speaking foreign teacher in each class, will aid their children in the highly competitive globalize world of today (Peng, 2008). Besides, parents possessed a high expectation that their children will possess a higher achievement in English language learning during their time in cram schools. The reasons above motivated the researcher to undergo a study, which would determine a better approach in English language teaching in Taiwan.
In the beginning of the semester in February 2008, First graders of various backgrounds were facing difficulties in reading. Most of them felt that English language learning was too hard for them. Students have poor word recognition, reading comprehension and may be unfamiliar with the perception between letters and their sounds. Some of them have no confidence because they have a lack of understanding of the instruction, or they have poor listening ability. Consequently, it is boring for them to attend class, which may result in a loss of interest in learning English in the future.

As a teacher and practitioner in the First grade class, the researcher tried various techniques and strategies, and tried to find out which was the most effective instruction. From then on, every statement that the researcher encountered during her academic studies were used and developed towards answering the question on how to find more effective ways and strategies in teaching English language to the students.

The researcher conducted a pilot study from December to March, 2008. The researcher applied on story telling and phonic skills, topic-based craft activities, total physical response and whole language principles without separating the students from their required textbooks in the school. Through classroom observations and individual assessments, students started to study English and tried to compare their English lessons in their public school with the cram school. They felt that learning English is a big struggle which they must work harder. As beginners, the students faced a giant problem in acquiring or learning English as foreign language.
Several field notes written during the observation, such as following:

Field notes: March 12, 2008

Students think that the English language learning is a difficult task. They are struggling. However, some students seemed to have a natural ability in learning the language.

Some of the students naturally love learning English; they even put their hobbies into the learning process. They liked to memorize both vocabulary and phonics learning. Students showed improvement in their listening skills during the pilot study. Some of them improve a lot in reading; however, most of these were due to their strong background in basic English. As a teacher, the researcher kept on pursuing ways that the students need in acquiring English in their life as a **skill** and not just as a **subject**.

Excerpts from the researcher’s journal: January 2008

“I need to think what to do with my slow learners, my very low esteem kids, my behavioral kids, my learning disability kids, my attention deficit kids, and my reluctant readers and writers, without neglecting the progress of the school syllabus. I need to find some creative, constructive, and effective teaching methods to be able to help the weak ones learn to read better. They need more time on tasks such as reading and writing. What do they need to do? How can I teach them?”

Afterwards, the researcher begins the pilot study in order to find out what strategies are best suitable for the students, which simultaneously help them develop their
leaning ability and attitudes. During the process of the pilot study, the researcher discovered that the Balanced Reading Instruction (BRI), which offered an alternative to the extremes of pure phonics or whole language; is quite encouraging. It provided an effective combination of instructional approaches and it accommodates various learning styles (M Pressley, Weaver, & Alterman, 1998). However, the required textbooks in the English cram school are the sole materials used for in the researcher’s teaching. Thus, the questions still exists on how do students improve their English reading comprehension, if they don’t have a literacy rich environment with resources to real literature, and guides for their English language learning process.

As a preparation for the formal study, a pilot study was carried out by the researcher with two major objectives in mind. The first objective was to investigate the feasibility of balanced reading instructions program for EFL beginners. The second objective was to determine which of the rich variety of balanced reading instructions will be appropriated for EFL beginners in the researcher’s classroom. The formal study; essentially follows the design of the preliminary pilot study, not only expanding the scope but also further exploring the effects on letter knowledge, phonological awareness and reading attitude.

The pilot study appeared with a result that BRI program is feasible to be implemented fro EFL beginners and there were some functional and effective strategies which appropriate for the EFL beginners, such as: Shared Reading, Guided Reading, Self Selected Reading and Writing. The BRI program continually implemented and developed by the researcher for the formal study in action cycle processes.
According to previous research on balanced reading instruction in Taiwan, Leou and Huang (2004) determined that BRI program had generally positive impact on fifth grade students’ reading ability and motivation. The experimental program showed also their word recognition ability was very great. Beside that Fu (2008) presented her research findings that BRI program was beneficial in enhancing students English word recognition, improve reading comprehension ability but did not enhance students attitude toward reading English children books significantly.

The previous research results also motivate the researcher as practitioner to enhance the BRI program for EFL beginners in a Taiwan cram school.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to determine how effective Balanced Reading Instruction program to the EFL beginners in the classroom. The researcher believes that her goal as a purposeful teacher is to provide the best instruction that would enable students to become fluent and competent English readers.

Reading is a pivotal proficiency for academic success, it is crucial that as to researcher and practitioner alike, should attain a rich understanding of the factors that are involved in Taiwanese students’ English reading development. Despite the abundance of previous researches, more studies are needed to further investigate the effects of balanced reading instruction on Taiwanese EFL students. In addition, there is a need to help improve reading ability and more significantly aid the students’ learning attitudes towards English.
1.3 Research Questions

Based on the above purposes three research questions are presented as follows:

1. How will balanced reading instruction program affect EFL beginners’ letter knowledge and phonological awareness?
2. How will balanced reading instruction program affect EFL beginners’ reading attitude?

1.4 Definition of Terms

**Balanced Reading Instruction** – is an instruction approaching of whole language and phonic skills in order to help students’ individual needs especially in reading.

**Letter Knowledge** – this is the same as alphabet knowledge; which is the ability to name and write the 26 alphabet letters. It indicates children’s interest in learning letters and sounds relate to one another and help them to remember how the words are spelled.

**Phonological Awareness** – is the ability to segment and blend phonemes for the development of decoding skills, reading fluency, and spelling. Usually it’s structured by syllables, onsets, rimes and phonemes.

**Language-rich Classroom** – An environment which contains print in all shapes and forms that encourages associations of spoken words. Usually like class library that contains a wide variety of texts: picture books, storybooks, poems, and informational texts, big books, etc.
Reading attitudes - is a reader’s feeling and opinion, such as like or dislike, during the reading process. The reading attitude encompasses three aspects: (a) the belief aspect refers to the thoughts, ideas, knowledge or opinion pertaining to the expectation of reading; (b) The feeling aspect shows the positive and negative feelings or evaluations of reading; and (c) The behavior aspect demonstrates the overt actions during reading. In this study, it refers to students’ responses on questionnaire and interview questions about their reading attitudes toward English children literatures. And a complex process and a number of different models have been proposed in the attempt to explain the relationship between reading attitudes and reading performance (Butler, 2007).

EFL Beginners – this is the entry level group of students learning the English as a foreign language. Students are mostly coming from diverse background knowledge, age, and behaviors.

Figure 1 First grade students