It is well observed that in recent years an increased number of students from culturally, linguistically diverse backgrounds are enrolled in U.S. preK-12 schools. Many English language learners (ELLs) don't get a chance to learn English due to lack of English speaking home environment. In many cases their parents are unable to speak English or their family members prefer to use their native language at home for they want their children to be able to master the native language and retain their cultural heritage. Regardless, it is possible for young ELLs to master both English and their native language from a young age. It might seem that the earlier young ELL children start studying another language like English other than their native language, the easier it is for them to reach a native speaker's level in the second language acquisition. Bilingual learning improves ELLs' cognitive development as well as their self-esteem. Very often young ELLs are very proud of themselves being able to speak two languages and more knowledgeable than their peers.

However, studying two languages from a young age can put young ELLs at risk of struggling in both languages especially at the initial stage of bilingual study and when the native language has different phonological system from English. A very common phenomenon known about ELLs is that they switch codes between the two languages and they use their native language to interpret English reading. Language delay is very often observed among young ELLs and many times ELLs have poor reading comprehension abilities. Many young ELLs struggle in English phonics, vocabulary, English grammar, story retelling, or reading comprehension questions. Since phonological knowledge has a direct impact on reading comprehension (Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2012), when ELLs don't have adequate phonic knowledge in English, they have a hard time pronouncing some vocabularies, which in turn affects their reading speed. More than phonics, semantics is another key in reading comprehension. Many times vocabulary plays a key role in an entire sentence. If ELLs are unable to understand the key vocabulary, they may not be able to understand the entire sentence or even the whole paragraph. However, understanding only the meaning of vocabulary is far from sufficient. Rather, ELLs also need to know American culture in order to fully understand the meaning of the word within the context of the story they read. For example, when a text reflects traditional American festivals, sports, or American history, young ELLs usually experience difficulty in understanding the context in the story and in retaining what they have just read because of inadequate background knowledge.

Other factors contribute to this issue such as lack of stable home environment, limited literacy materials at home, and children's lack of confidence in mastering and using English since young ELLs are not raised in an English speaking environment. At the same time, some ELLs who are raised in a literacy rich environment might still struggle in English speaking, reading, and writing at a young age. Bilingual education at a young age challenges children especially when the two languages adopt different phonological system and written system such as Chinese and English, Japanese and English, and others. In addition, mastering two languages at a young age requires children to decode two different types of information and switch freely between two different codes. Thus it takes time to process the phonological information and semantic information in the two languages, resulting in a delay in reading, writing, and speaking in both languages.

**Reading is Key**

In order to improve ELLs' English language proficiency, teachers should adjust their teaching strategies to practice basic phonics and master the meaning of vocabulary and oral proficiency first. These basic skills help with reading fluency, which is believed to impact reading comprehension (Quirk & Beem, 2012). However,
mastery of vocabulary alone doesn’t guarantee good reading comprehension. Quirk and Beem’s (2012) study suggests that although ELL students may be able to pronounce words correctly, they lack full understanding of their meaning. ELLs are not usually familiar with the context wherein the vocabularies are used and the cultural facts related to these vocabularies. As a result, they have difficulty understanding the paragraph or the entire given text.

In order to improve reading comprehension, ELLs should acquire rich cultural heritage. At the same time, teachers should obtain information regarding areas related to language and content that ELLs struggle with, and design instructional plans, or adopt supplemental instruction to increase vocabulary, improve reading fluency, and reading comprehension. One important ways to improve the language skills of ELLs in both the native language and English is through reading. Reading allows ELLs to learn vocabulary, sentence structure, syntax, capitalization and punctuation, function words; they acquire an understanding of American culture, which can lead to an increase in their overall English language proficiency. Mastering good reading habits to improve reading comprehension is beneficial to young language learners and will benefit them in their future academic endeavors.

But how can young ELLs improve their reading comprehension? There are many types of visual strategies that support ELLs’ reading abilities such as bilingual picture books, books with visual cues (e.g., add a picture to words that possibly pose a challenge for ELLs to understand), real objects, or drama. In this paper different visual strategies are explained in details with a purpose to improve young ELLs’ reading comprehension level and increase their language abilities in English.

**Visual Strategies Improve ELLs’ Reading Comprehension**

**Homemade Bilingual Picture Books**

Not all books have a bilingual version. If you cannot find a bilingual version of a book, teachers and parents can work together to make bilingual picture books. There are several ways to make bilingual books. One easy way to do this is by adding a note card with either English translation/native language translation to each page of the book. Ask parents or someone who knows the child’s native language to help with the translation. The note card with translation can be glued or taped to each page. When the homemade bilingual book is ready, let ELLs read in their native language first, then in English, and provide assistance when necessary. ELLs can try to read in English only and refer to their native language version when needed. After reading, ask them to retell and write what they have learned from the book, or draw a picture of their favorite book characters. Always remember to ask questions that relate to ELLs’ personal experiences. These activities help the ELLs deepen their understanding of the book contents as well as practice their memory and summary skills. If the books are not picture books, teachers and caregivers can ask ELLs to draw a picture for each page they just read. Through visual representation of the page contents they just read, young ELLs learn to recall what they have just read, through which young ELLs practice memory and comprehension skills. This can also help them practice eye hand coordination, fine motor skills and logic thinking. In the process of drawing, teachers can ask children “wh” questions such as “Why did you draw the picture in this way?” or “What do you predict is going to happen in the next page?” These questions can trigger critical thinking for ELLs. ELLs can benefit from the “text-based questioning not only because of the cognitive and language processes it supports but also the interest and motivation it awakes in students” (Taboada, 2012, p.87). ELLs are encouraged to form the questions and bring the questions for discussion with peers after reading. Book club is a good way for students to discuss book characters and therefore practice critical thinking (Park, 2012).

Once the ELLs reach a certain reading level, they will move on to chapter books. However, they might still come across words that they will have difficulty to understand. This will impact their reading rate, fluency, and comprehension of the book contents. If that is the case, use picture word combinations within the text to improve reading comprehension. First of all, picture flash cards of difficult words are appropriate for beginning readers because at this stage they rely more on “word semantic cues to comprehend the meaning of given texts” (Chik, et al., 2010, p.14) than older children and those who read at the intermediate or advanced level. Other researchers (i.e., Quirk & Beem, 2012; Stygles, 2012; Taboada, 2012) also emphasize the importance of vocabulary in impacting ELLs’ reading comprehension. Introducing new vocabulary to ELLs as a pre-reading activity can help speed up their reading and improve comprehension of the given text. Pictures to be used for introducing vocabulary could be hand drawn or printed off the computer. Teachers, parents, or peers can work with the ELLs to practice these words by quizzing them their meaning, their synonyms and antonyms, or composing several sentences using the vocabulary words. During the before reading activity, both word and picture combinations can be applied to introduce a book.

For example, before ELLs read a book about St. Patrick’s Day, teachers can show a picture beside the word leprechaun, or help ELLs to make an artwork of a shamrock, in case ELLs have a hard time understanding what the words leprechaun and shamrocks mean. Teachers can also use pictures to describe how St. Patrick’s Day is
celebrated, and the origin of this festival to assist ELLs' understanding of the story and the festival, which will also help them understand books and stories related to this festival in the future. Related discussions also can be held to expand ELLs' knowledge of the books such as why the U.S. celebrates festivals that European countries celebrate, and why people immigrated to the U.S. in the past. Other topics such as the festivals that people in other cultures celebrate can also be shared in class discussions. ELLs are especially encouraged to share their experiences of celebrating their own traditional festivals. They can bring pictures of foods, clothes, and/or decorations used at celebrating their traditional festivals to class. Throughout, the teachers can create opportunities for ELLs to practice narration, develop writing abilities, and increase social interaction with peers. After obtaining adequate number of vocabulary words and information about American culture and history, ELLs should practice how to summarize, sequence facts or plots contained in stories, analyze the cause and effect, and evaluate what they have just read to develop logical and critical thinking skills. Graphic organizers are excellent tools to help young ELLs reach such a goal.

**Graphic Organizers**

Graphic organizers have been widely used by teachers to help students organize and summarize content, classify facts, and analyze and compare contents they read. There are different types of graphic organizers for different reading materials. In this article, real examples are described to explain how to use graphic organizers to help ELLs comprehend book content by classifying facts, analyzing problems, summarizing main points, and criticizing or evaluating the decisions made by authors. When reading narrative stories, it is recommended to use a graphic organizer to help ELLs predict what they expect in the story before reading, check whether they understand what's going on during reading, and retell and summarize what they can remember after reading. For example, Figure 1 illustrates a graphic organizer that emphasizes the beginning, middle and end of the story, which is a perfect match to summarizing a story. ELLs also can be guided to analyze the problems posed in the story and the solution to that problem by using graphic organizer in Figure 2. For stories that explain cause and effect, graphic organizer described in Figure 3 can help comprehension. Graphic organizer introduced in Figure 4 can be used to analyze stories such as Eve Bunting's (1997) *A Day's Work*, or Jacqueline Woodson's (2001) *The Other Side*, which explains immigrant family, ethnic differences, and the communication among children between different racial backgrounds. ELLs are also encouraged to share their parents' professions.
and the communities they live in.

When reading books centered on science facts like how trees grow, how to plant a pumpkin seed, or how to take care of beehives, graphic organizers that ask for steps or process can be used to help young ELLs understand sequence and ordering (see Figure 5, for example). For children's books like Ellen Jackson's (2003) *Turn of the Century: Eleven Centuries of Children and Change* that introduces history from children's perspectives, teachers can use the timeline graphic organizer in Figure 6 to have ELLs organize the facts mentioned in the book in a sequential order. The timeline graphic organizer provides ELLs a visual way to understand time concept.

After using graphic organizers to analyze the main concepts or plots in the story, young ELLs will be guided to use a graphic organizer to retell the story either through rewriting the story or telling the story to a peer. Teachers can pair ELLs with peers at a higher reading level. After the book reading, the two students are required to relate the book to their own experiences, through which their discourse skills are practiced. Chik et al. (2010) suggest that narrating what happened in their daily life is a very critical factor in improving reading comprehension skills; discourse skills predict comprehension abilities. For example, after reading a book about Christmas, a pair of students is required to compose a book themselves to describe how their own families celebrate this festival. Through this kind of writing activities ELLs practice description skills and skills to examine the connections and sequence between and among events, which also improve reading comprehension skills.

**Other Visual Tools**

Other visual tools that enhance ELLs' understanding of book contents include maps or globes to improve understanding of books about travel, world, or habitats. For example, teachers, peers, older siblings, or parents can refer to a map or globe while reading a book about travel to help ELLs improve reading comprehension. Even map puzzles and puzzles relevant to the book topics can be used to help ELLs visually understand what is going on in the book. Teachers can develop a toy tote bag to hold all the relevant materials including the book so that an ELL or anyone who struggles with reading can use these materials to improve reading comprehension and cultivate their interest in book reading.

Additionally, use the Internet to search relevant information to expand ELLs' understanding of book content. There are many websites that children can benefit from to improve their reading comprehension and bring words to sounds. For example, when reading...
books about *Cat in the Hat* series, ELLs can be guided to check the PBS Kids "Cat in the Hat" link to play some relevant games on computer. So are the times when children read books about Caillou, Kai-lan, and Curious George. Another good way to involve young ELLs in reading is to show them relevant movies after the book reading or design a puppet show. For example, after reading books about Cinderella, show ELLs the Cinderella movie. Then ask them to tell what they recall from watching the movie. Teachers can lead a discussion focusing on the differences ELLs can identify from reading the Cinderella book and watching the movie. A puppet show is also a good way to connect the book as well as arouse ELLs' interest in book content. Teachers should also check with their local children's museum for puppet shows. If neither puppet shows nor movies related to books are available, teachers can involve ELLs and their peers in making puppet shows.
themselves. Puppets also can be homemade. Simply draw or print the book characters, cut out, glue them to popsicle sticks, and then make a stage for the puppet show. ELLs are encouraged to play together with their peers.

Besides movies, games, or puppet shows, ELLs can be encouraged to act out the book contents with their peers. Teachers can help them figure out the appropriate costumes and make up for the characters. This is a good way to visualize book characters. Park (2012) also recommends visualization as an important tool to deepen students' understanding of book characters and contents. If ELLs have a hard time figuring out how to act out certain characters, teachers can assign other peers who know how to act to demonstrate first. If the books have been converted to film, teachers can show ELLs the movie, and then invite them to pattern their acting out of the character from the movie. Through video modeling, ELLs can visually see how the characters act and how they interpret book contents. ELLs can usually act out the characters independently without adult assistance after watching the video.

Another visual way to improve ELLs' reading comprehension is by collecting relevant materials to represent the book contents. For example, when reading books about ocean life, teachers can guide ELLs to collect sea shells to expand the knowledge they learned in the book. Also teachers can bring ELLs to a field trip to an aquarium to learn more of the ocean life. When reading books about dinosaurs or other natural science books, children can be brought to visit a natural science museum to explore more of the topics.

Memory, especially short-term memory, also plays an important role in reading comprehension. During breaks or free play time young ELLs can play memory games to relax and practice memory skills at the same time. Playing memory game creates opportunities for ELLs to socially interact with English speaking peers and improve English listening and speaking proficiency. Compared to memory games that are purchased, the homemade memory games can be adapted to focus on ELLs' favorite topics such as beach, ocean animals, dinosaurs, cars, trains, etc. The rules of memory games can be modified to increase ELLs' vocabulary. For example, add words to pictures on memory games. At play whoever matches two same cards is required to sound out the word and make a sentence using this word.

Using picture cards to memorize and analyze the
main plots from stories is another visual strategy to improve reading comprehension. Teachers and parents can put the main plots from a story on picture cards; they shuffle the cards, and then ask ELLs to put the cards in a correct order. When readers can identify and understand “causal connectives, some particular features such as time and sequence markers” (Chik et al., 2010, p.13), they gain a faster understanding of the sequence of the events, and the cause and effect, leading to independent reading. One main goal of improving reading comprehension is for students to obtain knowledge independently and develop a logical and critical thinking ability, and eventually become lifelong learners.

Conclusion
Reading comprehension is a way for ELLs to obtain knowledge and to become independent lifelong learners. In order to improve their reading comprehension skills, ELLs should first be able to understand vocabulary, its meaning, the context it is used, its function, and how to use it to compose sentences. For example, when ELLs understand causal connectives in sentences, and the time and sequence factors, they are able to predict the events in the story, and analyze the cause and effect that can lead to a better understanding of the given text. Different visual tools that can help ELLs reach this goal are introduced and explained with detailed examples such as using homemade picture books, graphic organizers, and other visual tools such as drama, shuffled flashcard, and memory games. School teachers, parents and/or peers can work with ELLs in using these visual tools to improve their English proficiency; hence also improving their reading comprehension. Teachers should consider modifying their instruction method to accommodate ELLs’ specific learning needs, maximize their interaction with peers, and capitalize on their learning potential. Improving reading comprehension is not the end. Rather the ultimate goal should be that ELLs obtain new knowledge through reading to become critical, logical thinkers, and independent lifelong learners.

References

Children’s Books Cited