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Turning the Page: Parent-Child Interactions During Picture Book Reading in Japan and the U.S.

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1. Introduction

Storybook reading is a widely practiced educational activity in both Japan and the United States, serving not only as a means for linguistic and empathetic development but also as a rich context for interactive engagement between caregivers and children (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2016; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2019). While much of the research on shared book reading has focused on outcomes such as vocabulary acquisition (Blewitt et al., 2009; Ninio, 1983; Payne et al., 1994), grammar acquisition (Noble et al., 2018), reading comprehension development (Bus et al., 1995; Duursma et al., 2008; Hindman et al., 2013), and empathy (Aram & Aviram, 2009; Kerigan & Çelebi Öncü, 2022; Kucirkova, 2019; Ozaki, 2023; Takada & Kawashima, 2019), there is a notable gap in research examining the transitions within the activity itself, and how these transitions contribute to parent-child conversations and children's language development. These transitions, or shifts in the structure of interaction, represent critical moments that potentially shape the conversations between parents and children before, during, and after storybook reading.

Transitions within activities have been extensively studied from a conversation analysis perspective, including the initiation and conclusion of activities (Broth & Mondada, 2013; Mortensen & Hazel, 2014), shifts between activities (Fasulo et al., 2007; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2012), and transitions during the progression of planned actions (Keevallik, 2010; Keisanen et al., 2017). However, the transitions that occur in the context of picture book

reading have not been widely explored. Given that picture book reading is an interactively co-constructed activity (Crain-Thoreson et al., 2001; Justice & Kaderavek, 2003; Wang & Zheng, 2023; Wasik & Bond, 2001) and that parent-child conversational turn-taking follows patterns similar to regular conversation (Ninio & Bruner, 1978), it warrants attention as a subject of transition analysis.

Transitions during book reading can occur on various levels, from shifts in the activity itself—such as transitioning from dinner to reading time, or from reading to bedtime—to more subtle transitions within the reading activity, such as changes in focus. One significant internal transition is page-turning, which Hosoma (2014) describes as the closing of one visual space and the emergence of a new one. This act of turning a page brings with it a responsibility to maintain the narrative flow, as noted by Jacobs (2016), who highlights how readers must connect the story’s progression while also allowing space to integrate their reactions and background knowledge. The timing of these transitions and the type of knowledge brought into the reading process likely vary depending on individual and cultural factors, making it an area of interest for further study. Accordingly, this paper aims to address the existing gap in research concerning transitions during picture book reading, with a particular focus on the shifts that occur when turning pages—a moment that both symbolically and physically signifies a transition from one narrative space to another.

2. Methodology

Participants include 52 Japanese-speaking and 62 English-speaking dyads, with children aged between 2 to 23 months. Each dyad was instructed to read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969; 1976) in their native language, a choice driven by the book’s global accessibility and consistency in layout between the original and translated versions. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* follows a caterpillar that hatches from an egg, eats through various foods, gets a stomachache, and then forms a cocoon. After resting, it transforms into a butterfly. The dyads were asked to record themselves reading the book, and to send the video to the researcher together with a post-recording questionnaire about demographics and daily reading practices at home.

Upon transcribing all the videos collected, utterances made by the caregiver during the

act of turning pages were categorized as page-turning utterances. If an utterance began before the page-turning and continued throughout the process, it was also coded as a page-turning utterance. Through exploratory coding, seven primary types of page-turning utterances were identified, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Types of Identified Page-turning Utterances

Type of Page-turning Utterance	Example
Utterances to capture child's attention	<i>mitemasu ka?</i> ('Are you watching?') <i>hai, ī kana?</i> ('Okay are you ready?')
Continuation of book reading	<i>akai ne.</i> ('It's red') <i>onaka peko peko datte.</i> ('He's really hungry')
Story prediction	<i>sā, nani ga detekurun darō.</i> ('Now, I wonder what's going to come out')
Exclamations	<i>wā!</i> ('Wow!') <i>sugoi!</i> ('Amazing!')
Derailment ⁱ	<i>sō ieba XX ni niteru ne.</i> ('Come to think of it, it looks like XX.')
Explicit reference to page turning	<i>pēji mekutte.</i> ('Turn the page')
Sound effects accompanying page turning	<i>polon, jān, pero</i> (all sound effects)

3. Findings

3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Page-turning Utterances

The analysis revealed that 42.3% of Japanese parents (22 out of 52 pairs) and 43.5% of American parents (27 out of 62 pairs) made utterances during page-turning sequences.ⁱⁱ These results indicate that in both groups, more than half of the parents did not draw their children’s focus to the act of turning the page. This suggests that page-turning, as a transitional phase in picture book reading, is often treated as a natural, non-verbal event by parents, potentially to maintain the flow of the narrative.

A closer examination of the specific types of utterances showed notable differences

between the Japanese and American participants. Three categories were particularly prominent: derailment, explicit references to page-turning, and sound effects accompanying page-turning. As shown in Table 2, derailment was observed only among the American participants, with 8.1% (5 out of 62) exhibiting this behavior. This may suggest a cultural tendency among some American parents to use page-turning moments as an opportunity to deviate from the narrative by making comments or asking questions unrelated to the story. In contrast, sound effects accompanying page-turning were noted among 13.5% of the Japanese parents (7 out of 52), while none of the American parents utilized such sound effects.

Explicit references to page-turning were more common in the American sample (27.4%, 17 out of 62) than in the Japanese sample (13.5%, 7 out of 52). This indicates that American parents were more likely to directly acknowledge the act of turning a page, possibly reflecting a more overt form of engagement with the reading process.

Table 2
Frequency and Ratio of Page-turning Utterances

Type of Utterance	Japanese Dyads		American Dyads	
	raw	ratio	raw	ratio
Utterances to capture child's attention	2	3.8%	0	0.0%
Continuation of book reading	6	11.5%	6	9.7%
Story prediction	3	5.8%	1	1.6%
Exclamations	4	7.7%	3	4.8%
Derailment ⁱ	0	0.0%	5	8.1%
Explicit reference to page turning	7	13.5%	17	27.4%
Sound effects accompanying page turning	7	13.5%	0	0.0%

3.2 Page-turning Utterances by Scene

The distribution of utterances during page-turning varied depending on the section of the story being read. In the Japanese data, there were more utterances during the early and concluding parts of the story, with fewer utterances in the middle. This pattern suggests that Japanese parents may be more verbally engaged at the beginning, when setting up the context, and toward the end, when summarizing or concluding the narrative. In the American

data, the highest frequency of utterances occurred during the early part of the story, with a gradual decrease toward the end. This suggests that American parents may front-load their engagement during the initial stages of page-turning, with less emphasis on verbal interaction during page-turning as the story progresses.

Table 3
Frequency and Ratio of Page-turning Utterances by Scene

Scene	Japanese Dyads		American Dyads	
Introduction and Development of the story: Caterpillar eating various foods (until Friday)	12	23.1%	23	37.1%
Twist: The caterpillar’s stomachache and recovery (Saturday and Sunday)	5	9.6%	11	17.7%
				4.8%
Conclusion: Becomes a chrysalis and transforms into a butterfly	16	30.8%	3	

3.3 Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis of each type of page-turning utterance showed further differences among the Japanese and American data. In the excerpt of a book reading session between an American mother and her 1 year and 1 month old daughter (excerpt 1), the mother employs a highly interactive and participative approach that is characteristic of American reading styles. The conversation begins with the mother narrating the story, using expressive intonation to highlight certain words such as “Sunday” and “one nice green leaf” in lines 1–2, which not only makes the reading engaging but also draws the child’s attention to specific elements of the story. After describing the caterpillar’s actions and its resulting feelings (line 3), she pauses for 3.5 seconds, during which she looks at her child, drums her fingers at the next page, and then invites the child to participate by asking, “Do you want to turn the page?” This question serves to involve the child actively in the reading process, not just as a listener but as a participant in controlling the pace and progress of the story. Following the child’s response, she praises her with “Good girl,” reinforcing the child’s participation positively (line 4). The mother then directs the child’s attention back to the book with an excited command

in a large voice, “Look at this. He’s chubby,” pointing out details in the illustrations to further engage her child’s interest and understanding of the story.

Excerpt 1: Explicit Reference to Page Turning by American Dyad (child’s age=1;1)ⁱⁱⁱ

- 1 MOT: The next day was Sun↑day again(,)
2 The caterpillar ate through o:ne↑ nice↑ green leaf(.)
3 and after that↑ he felt much better(.) (3.5)
4 **Do you want to turn the page(?)** Good girl(.)
5 LOOK at THIS(?) He’s chubby (.)

Contrastively, in excerpt 2, a reading session between a Japanese mother and her 1 year and 4 month old child, the mother adopts a more guided and narrative-driven approach, which is reflective of typical Japanese reading styles. The mother starts by setting the scene in a soothing, deliberate tone, describing the caterpillar’s condition at night with a focus on its emotions, “That night, the caterpillar cried because its stomach hurt” (lines 1-2). After this, she pauses significantly for 1.5 seconds, which may allow the child to absorb the emotional content of the story, and then empathetically utters *Acha::* (‘Oh no::’), aligning her emotions with that of the caterpillar, thus modeling empathetic engagement with the story (line 3).

This pause and empathetic interjection also serve to emphasize the sadness of the caterpillar’s situation, enhancing the emotional impact of the story on the listener. Following this, without soliciting input from the child about moving forward in the book, she announces *Mekurimasu yo* (‘I’ll turn the page’), and turns the page herself (line 4). This action shows a didactic approach where the mother controls the pace and progression of the reading, guiding the child through the story in a structured manner. The style here is less about collaborative interaction and more about presenting and narrating the story, with the mother taking a leading role in how the reading session unfolds, which is indicative of a more adult-led interaction common in Japanese parent-child dyads during reading.

Excerpt 2: Explicit Reference to Page Turning by Japanese Dyad (child's age=1;4)

1 MOT: Sono ban_↑ (.) Aomushi wa_↑ (.)
2 That night the caterpillar
That night, the caterpillar
2 Onaka ga itakute nakimashita (,) (1.5)
stomach hurting cried
cried because its stomach hurt.
3 Acha::hh (1.2)
Oh no::
Oh no::
4 **Mekurimasu yo** (.)
Will turn
I'll turn the page.

In Excerpt 3, a Japanese mother reading to her 4-month-old child, sound effects are used as a distinctive feature of the interactions during page turning. The mother begins by narrating that the caterpillar found an apple and ate it, followed by the sound effect *pero*. As the word *pero* can be used to represent the sound of eating or licking, it is unclear from this single instance whether the mother is continuing the narration or adding a sound effect. However, it was noted that *pero* was consistently used by the mother throughout the reading, even on pages where the caterpillar was not depicted eating. This suggests that the use of *pero* was intended as a sound effect rather than a continuation of the book's text.

The mother's integration of sound effects is indicative of a style unique to Japanese dyads, where sound effects are commonly employed to engage the child and maintain attention. Furthermore, these sound effects frequently accompany page turning. This practice differs from the approach observed in American dyads, where such sound effects are non-prevalent, and the focus is more on engaging the child through direct participation, as

previously discussed. This use of sound effects aligns with a more performative and guided reading style in Japanese parent-child interactions, emphasizing the parent's role in leading the session while simultaneously drawing the child's attention with creative auditory cues.

Excerpt 3: Sound Effects Accompanying Page Turning by Japanese Dyad (child's age=0;4)

- 1 MOT: Ringo o hitotsu mitsukete! (.) tabemashita (.) pero!
 Apple one found and ate (.) pero!
 The caterpillar found one apple and ate it. Pero
- 2 Mada (.) onaka wa peccopeco (?)
 Still (.)stomach is very hungry (?)
 But it was still very hungry.

In Excerpts 4 and 5, instances of derailment during page turning in interactions between American parents and their children can be observed, a feature that appears to be unique to the American participants in this study.

In Excerpt 4, as the mother transitions between pages, she temporarily moves away from the story's plot by asking, "Are you hungry?" in line 4. This question directly addresses the child and introduces a topic outside the context of the caterpillar's actions. After this brief interaction, she resumes the narrative seamlessly, continuing with "On Thursday he ate through four strawberries." This interruption marks a shift in focus from the caterpillar's experience to a personalized interaction with the child, introducing an element of derailment.

Similarly, in Excerpt 5, the father also engages in derailment while turning a page. After narrating that the caterpillar "had quite a stomach-ache," he turns to the child and makes a personal remark, "Yeah... What do you think? You would too if you ate all of that" (lines 2–4). This statement deviates from the narrative to introduce a more personalized, humorous comment, followed by an additional derailment as he says, "That's like what Mommy eats after Daddy goes to bed" (lines 4–5). Here, the father not only shifts the focus from the story but also adds a personal anecdote, inviting a conversational response that moves away from the book's content. These derailments are briefly humorous and draw on real-life parallels,

bringing in family dynamics and engaging the child in a different, more relational mode of interaction.

This pattern of derailment during page turning appears to be a characteristic feature of the American samples, where parents often take the opportunity during pauses in the story to address the child directly, make humorous remarks, or introduce personal references. This contrasts with the Japanese dyads, where the focus remains more closely on the narrative, and there are fewer shifts away from the story's content during the reading process. The inclusion of these derailments in the American samples suggests a reading style that emphasizes parent-child interaction beyond the immediate context of the story, incorporating real-world connections and humor as a means of engaging the child and fostering a more collaborative interaction.

Excerpt 4: Derailment During Page Turning by American Dyad 1 (child's age=0;5)

- 1 MOT: On Wednesday he ate through £ three £ plums
2 but he was still h(h)ungry(h).
3 CHI: (hhh)
4 MOT: (..)Are you hungry(?) On Thursday he ate through fou::r
5 strawberries

Excerpt 5: Derailment During Page Turning by American Dyad 2 (child's age=0;5)

- 1 FAT: Th(h)at night(h) (..)he £ had £ quite a
2 stomach-ache (hh) (1.0) Yeah (1.0) What do you think(?)
3 You would (..) you would too(..) if you ate all of
4 that(.) **That's like what Mommy eats (..) after Daddy**
5 **goes to bed(,)=**
6 MOT: =(hhhh[hh]
7 FAT: [The next day↑ (..) was Sunday again

4. Discussion

This study has explored how page-turning transitions during shared picture book reading sessions contribute to parent-child interactions in both Japanese and American contexts. The quantitative and qualitative findings highlight differences in how these transitions are navigated, suggesting cultural influences on parental strategies for engagement during book reading.

Foremost, the findings of this study suggest that page-turning, a naturally ambiguous transition in picture book reading, often goes unremarked upon by parents in both Japanese and American contexts, with nearly 60% of parents in both groups remaining silent during this moment. However, despite the similar frequency of silence, the nature of the utterances made during page-turning reveals meaningful cultural differences. These differences suggest that when parents do choose to speak during this transition, it is likely done with specific intent, reflecting distinct cultural practices.

In the Japanese data, explicit references to page-turning or the use of sound effects were more pronounced, particularly in key moments of the reading session. Examples such as *pero* and phrases such as *mekurimasu yo* mirror the performative style often seen in *kamishibai*, a traditional form of storytelling involving dramatic pauses and audience engagement (Ishiguro, 2022). This suggests that Japanese parents might adopt a story-centric approach, where their utterances serve to highlight and enhance the narrative structure. The emphasis appears to be on guiding the child through the story in a way that emphasizes the story's progression, possibly viewing the book as a carefully constructed sequence that should unfold clearly.

In contrast, the American parents exhibited a different pattern, particularly in their use of derailment early in the story, as well as their encouragement of the child's participation in the page-turning process, as seen in phrases such as "Do you want to turn the page?" This suggests a more dialogic or child-participation-focused reading style, where interaction and conversation between parent and child may take precedence over the storyline itself. The observed derailments in American reading sessions suggest that these moments of departure from the story may serve as opportunities to foster a more conversational and dialogic form of interaction, where the child is invited to engage with the reading process more personally.

This contrasts with the more didactic and guided approach seen in Japanese interactions, where parents maintain the flow of the narrative and the child is typically a more passive listener.

These findings indicate that the underlying goals of the reading activity might differ between Japanese and American parents. For the Japanese participants, the primary aim may be to guide the child through the narrative, emphasizing the progression of the story, much like a performative reading experience (Minami, 2002). Meanwhile, American parents may prioritize the development of dialogue and interaction with their child, integrating the reading of the book with more interactive elements that invite the child's active participation, even at the cost of narrative coherence.

Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these different reading styles on children's language development. For example, do children in more performative reading environments, such as those observed in Japanese dyads, develop stronger narrative skills, while children in more dialogic environments, such as the American dyads, develop stronger conversational abilities? Additionally, future studies could investigate whether these patterns hold across a wider variety of books and contexts, as well as how they change as children grow older and become more active participants in reading activities.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed key differences in how Japanese and American parents engage in page-turning transitions during shared picture book reading. While a majority of parents remain silent during these transitions, the utterances that do occur reflect distinct cultural approaches. Japanese parents tend to maintain narrative coherence through explicit references to page-turning and sound effects, resembling a *kamishibai*-like performative style. In contrast, American parents often adopt a dialogic approach, using page-turning as an opportunity for conversational engagement, including derailments and invitations for the child's participation. These findings suggest that during shared book reading, Japanese parents may emphasize narrative flow, while American parents may prioritize interactive engagement.

Notes

- i Derailment is defined as comments made by the parent or child that are not directly related to the storyline. For instance, a question such as “Are you also hungry?” deviates from the main narrative and centers on the here-and-now context of the participants, thus classified as derailment.
- ii The analysis targets the number of utterances made during page-turning sequences. A binary coding system was employed, where each type of utterance was marked as “1” if it was used at least once during the session, regardless of how many times it occurred; if a type of utterance was not used, it was marked as “0.” This approach was chosen due to certain utterance types, such as sound effects during page turns, being repeated frequently across each page.
- iii All excerpts henceforth are transcribed based on the Jefferson Conversation Analysis transcription method. All direct readings from the book are highlighted in gray. The page-turning utterance type in focus is in bold. The list of transcription conventions and abbreviations are in the appendix.

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Disclosure of Interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions and Abbreviations

- (0.0) time gap between utterances
- (.) time gap less than 0.19 second
- (.) slight rising intonation
- (?) sharp rising intonation

=	latching utterances with no intervals in between
[]	beginning and end of overlapping utterance
:	stretched vowel sound
↑	high pitch on the next utterance
↓	low pitch on the next utterance
h	outbreathing sound
(h)	breathiness within a word
£	suppressed laughter
<u>word</u>	emphasized utterance
WORD	louder than surrounding speech by same speaker