

# Mothers' Speech during Book Reading: A Pilot Study

Eiko Kato-Otani

## 読み聞かせ時の母親のことば：パイロット研究

加藤映子

### Abstract

This pilot study of book-reading interactions examines differences in verbal interactions between a Japanese mother and an American mother. Both mothers interacted with their children by requesting and providing information. However, the American mother focused more on her son's reading development while the Japanese mother focused more on her son's emotions during book-reading. Although it is impossible to draw conclusions based on this small sample, this study suggests the possibility of exploring the cultural diversity of reading practices in homes with preschool aged children.

**Key words:** book-reading, mother-child interaction, child development, reading development

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### 抄 録

このパイロット研究は、日本人とアメリカ人の母親が子どもに対して絵本をどのように読むかを分析したものである。両国の母親は共に、質問など通じて、必要と思われる情報を子どもに与えた。しかし、アメリカ人の母親が reading の発達に注意を払う傾向にあったのに対し、日本人の母親は子どもの社会性の発達に重点をおくという違いが見受けられた。今回のパイロット研究の小規模なサンプルから結論を導くことには注意が必要だが、家庭での未就学児に対する読み聞かせの文化的な違いが提示されていると言える。

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## **Introduction**

Impressive quantities of research about how mothers read stories to their preschool children have been conducted in the past 15 years in the US. Many researchers have emphasized the relationship between book-reading experiences and literacy development (Goldfield & Snow, 1984; Ninio, 1980; Snow, 1983; Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Snow & Ninio, 1986; Teale, 1986). However, different perspectives about the role of home book-reading activities may be found in different cultures. Thus, this pilot study explores differences in verbal interactions between a Japanese mother and an American mother.

In this paper, I will first examine previous studies of mother-child interaction during joint book-reading, and will focus on research relevant to Japanese children's development. Finally, I will analyze the American and Japanese mothers' speech during book reading.

## **US and Western European based book-reading studies**

Reading books to children is considered to be beneficial for children's language, literacy, and cognitive development as well as for reading readiness. Children's experience of joint book-reading activity is positively correlated with oral language skill and reading readiness and with later language and reading abilities in the elementary school years (Wells, 1985). Additionally, children acquire new information and vocabulary through joint book-reading activities at home (Goodsitt, Raitan, & Perlmutter, 1988).

Early exposure to books is believed to promote later literacy skills. For example, book-reading activities can provide opportunities for explicit vocabulary teaching (Ninio, 1980; Goldfield & Snow, 1984), and learning new words is central to language development. Children also have an opportunity to become familiar with print in books, distinguishing letters from other graphics (Snow & Ninio, 1986). Letter recognition and word recognition, which can be developed during book-reading, are also traditionally associated with reading readiness (Snow, 1993). Finally, children learn how to talk about books, an important skill in elementary school, during joint book-reading at home (Dickinson & Smith, 1991). They can also learn strategies for interpreting the anaphoric relationships represented by words such as "it," "this," "that," "he," and "she" (Mason, 1992).

Although the relationship between amount of joint book-reading and children's literacy and language development has been emphasized, the quality of joint book-reading is also important. For example, Teale (1984) observed three different book-reading styles among mothers with their children aged two and half. The first style he identified consisted of simply reading books to children without any interaction. The second style involved the child in book-reading by providing turn-taking opportunities and questions. In the third

style, mothers had their children echo them as they read. In addition, Reese and Cox (1999) found three different book-reading styles: **describers**, who focused on describing pictures; **comprehenders**, who focused on story meaning; and **collaborators**, who discussed story meaning upon completion. Children of describer-style mothers learned more receptive vocabulary and acquired better print skills than children exposed to the other two reading styles. However, children with higher vocabulary skills benefited from the collaborator reading style, indicating that children's language levels should be considered when assessing the effects of different reading styles.

The kind of questions parents pose during book-reading affect children's reading development. Heath (1982), for example, delineated three different types of questions: what-explanations, reason-explanations, and affective commentary. What-explanations are basic comprehension questions that help children understand story events, main ideas, etc. Reason-explanations require children to say why certain events happened or why characters performed a certain action. This type of question helps children to understand the implicit connections in a story. Affective commentary requires children to express their comments about events and characters, evaluating whether they are good or bad, funny or silly. Additionally, open-ended questions require the child to produce decontextualized language, improving their verbal skills. Parents' use of high cognitive demand questions was positively correlated with children's IQs (Pellegrini, Brody & Sigel, 1985).

In addition to the variability of reading styles and the kinds of questions parents pose during book-reading, researchers have found that interactional differences are related to book familiarity. Haden, Reese, and Fivush (1996) found that mothers showed less consistent book-reading styles across familiar and unfamiliar types of books. Mothers requested or provided more information when they read unfamiliar books. They confirmed children's utterances more, and made more comments about print knowledge and general knowledge when reading familiar books. Phillips and McNaughton (1990) also found that parents demanded children's participation more when reading familiar books. Moreover, Goodsitt, Raitan, and Perlmutter (1988) found that mothers and children produced more conversational exchanges when they read familiar books together.

Finally, home book-reading experiences increase children's interest in books and their independent reading. Motivation and desire to interact with books are correlated with parents' beliefs about joint book-reading activities (DeBaryshe, 1993). Mothers who believe that reading to children is beneficial frequently read to their children. They also made this joint book-reading activity more fun, which affected children's motivation to read (DeBaryshe, 1995).

## Mother-child interactions in Japan

Although the educational system, economy, and politics are similar in the US and Japan, child-rearing practices and beliefs are quite different. Japanese parents aim to raise an *iiko* (good child) and *sunao na ko* (obedient child) (White & Levine, 1986). These valued qualities are associated with cooperation, *omoiyari* (empathy), and interpersonal sensitivity. Japanese mothers demonstrate how children can be sensitive to the needs, wishes, and feelings of others when interacting with their children. Thus, styles of maternal communication play an important role in socializing children to culture-specific values.

*Omoiyari*, empathy or interpersonal sensitivity, is an important aspect of Japanese children's development. As they interact with their children, Japanese mothers demonstrate how children can be sensitive to the needs, wishes, and feelings of others. Clancy (1987) found that 45 percent of the mothers' directive utterances were appeals for *omoiyari*. Mothers in that study used several strategies to model how children should fulfill the wishes expressed by a speaker; for example, some expressed their requests for themselves without using imperative: "*Mama shinbun yomitai naa* [Gee, I want to read the newspaper]" (p. 232). They also tried to have children understand certain emotions that they expressed to encourage and discourage particular behaviors by making them feel the same emotion as mothers do. For example, when they see their child hit a toy, they might say "*Kawaiso, darumasan naguttara* [lit. The daruma is pitiful if you hit him]" (p. 232). Mothers use the same approach when they want to develop the child's loving feeling toward a pet, saying "*Kawaii* [Cute]" (p. 232). By learning how their mothers feel, children come to understand how others feel and thus learn how to behave themselves.

In addition, mothers tell their children directly about other people's thoughts and feelings directly in different situations by attributing speech to people who do not actually speak (Clancy, 1987). For example, when a child was playing with her toy, her mother directed her to show the toy to their guest by saying, "*Oneesan omocha misete tte* [Older sister says, 'show me your toy']" (p. 233), even though the guest did not say so. Also, mothers immediately point out troubles children cause to someone else. For example, when a child asked a guest to peel a tangerine for her, the mother quickly said, "*Oneesan jibun no muite taberu tte ne* [Older sister says she'll peel and eat her own]" (p. 234) even though the guest seemed willing to peel the fruit for the child. In this case, the mother showed her child that she should not bother the guest and that a person's actual behavior was not the same as their thinking.

## The Study

### Research questions

This pilot study examined differences in verbal interactions between middle-class American and middle-class Japanese mothers while reading an unfamiliar picture book and a familiar picture book. It focused on the following questions.

1. Are there differences in the predominant strategies (e.g. labeling, paraphrasing, requesting information) that Japanese and American mothers use while book-reading?
2. Do Japanese middle-class mothers display a print focus similar to middle-class American mothers?

### Participants

I recruited a Japanese mother-child dyad and a American mother-child dyad in Japan; both children were four years old. As the father of the American child is Japanese, the family, who resides in the US, visits the grandparents in Japan every summer. I asked the mother to read books to her son during their visit to Japan. I visited the Japanese mother at home and asked her to read stories to her son. Both mothers were college educated and middle class.

### Procedure

I asked the mothers to read two different types of book just as they usually read to their child. First, I asked them to choose a book which they often read, because the choice of their book might reveal their attitudes toward book reading. The American dyad chose A Very Hungry Caterpillar. The Japanese mother chose The Lady and The Tramp. I asked them to read Play With Me because many animals appear in this book and children need to understand why animals return and play with a little girl (the main character of the story). Each session was videotaped. After the book-reading session, I interviewed the mothers to see how they perceived their children's literacy development and book-reading activities.

### Transcribing data

The 4 book-reading sessions (two book-reading sessions for each participant) were transcribed into computer files in CHAT format for analysis with the CLAN software available through the Child Data Exchange System (CHILDES). Because CHAT transcription is computerized, it is easier and faster to search and tabulate codes for analysis. Since the purpose of my analysis was to examine differences in verbal interactions between middle-

class American and middle-class Japanese mothers, every utterance produced by both mothers and children was transcribed. I also transcribed nonverbal cues such as pauses, giggles, pointing, labeling, gaze, and so on to see how interactions occurred. However, I only analyzed the verbal utterances produced by the mothers, excluding children's utterances and other features during book reading for this project because it focuses on the mothers' speech.

### **Coding book-reading**

The coding scheme was adopted from previous US-based book-reading research (e.g. De Temple, 1994; Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996). The unit of analysis is every utterance produced by the mothers during the activity, excluding utterances produced by their child. Previous book reading studies suggest that book-reading exposure is related to children's language and literacy skills as well as to school achievement. I have also attempted to examine cultural differences in utterances during book reading between the American mother and the Japanese mother. I created codes to measure types of interactions (request information and provide information), book focus (book knowledge and print knowledge), and communicative talk which facilitated a dialogue. The subcategories of the interactions code were (request information and provide information) further divided into types of mothers' requests (location, labeling, fill in the blank, predictions, reason explanations, and emotion) and types of information mothers provided (labeling, paraphrasing, reason explanation, emotion, illustration, general knowledge, and vocabulary and language).

### **Inter-observer agreement**

Transcripts were coded independently by my cooperative partner and me and tests were conducted to assess the reliability of my coding system. I used the Cohen's kappa statistic to estimate inter-rater corrected-for-chance agreement; the scores ranged from .85 to .92.

### **Results**

Both the American mother and the Japanese mother interacted with their child during book reading. Each drew their child's attention to the books and provided information when reading. By examining the types of interaction, we see that they asked several different types of questions. Below, I display the results of coding: the number of interactions, types of interaction, types of information, and interview results.

#### **Number of interaction**

Table 1 shows the total number of interactions which occurred during the book read-

ing; it includes only utterances produced by the mother. Because the length of the familiar book which each dyad chose was different, it was difficult to compare each mother's interactions based solely on this. However, numbers of utterances for Play with Me were about the same for each dyad. The percentage of spontaneous utterances by the American mother was 70% for A Very Hungry Caterpillar and 55% for Play with Me. This shows that the American mother produced more utterances when she read the familiar book, A Very Hungry Caterpillar. For the Japanese mother, the percentage of Japanese mother's spontaneous utterances was 45% for The Lady and The Tramp and 55% for Play with Me. This shows that she produced more utterances when she read the unfamiliar book, Play with Me.

Table 1

Number of utterances of mothers produced

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Reading	30% (26)	45% ( 54)	54% ( 72)	45% ( 48)
Spontaneous Utterances	70% (60)	55% ( 66)	46% ( 62)	55% ( 59)
Total	100% (86)	100% (120)	100% (134)	100% (107)

( ) : the number of utterances

Hungry: A Very Hungry Caterpillar, Play: Play with Me, Lady: The Lady and The Tramp

### Types of utterances

Table 2 shows the types of interactions each mother had with her child. I created four main coding categories: interaction, book focus, communicative talk, and other talk. Each code has several categories and the results of each category will be discussed later. In this section, I highlight the differences between the two mothers.

The interaction code captures the types of requests mothers had and the types of information they gave during book readings. Comparing the results of Play with Me, the common book both mothers read, the Japanese mother interacted more than the American one. Book focus has two subcategories: book knowledge and print knowledge. The American mother focused 5% of her book talk on A Very Hungry Caterpillar and 2% on Play With Me, while the Japanese mother did not do so at all. Communicative talk is talk to facilitate the conversation, such as acknowledging the child's utterances and correcting child's answers. The American mother produced more interactions in this category, probably because she tried to get her focus on the book before she began. Other talk included the reading of a story and irrelevant talk. The American mother produced more utterances in this category when reading Play with Me. This was probably because she was negotiat-

ing what to do next with her child who did not want to read the book.

Table 2

Types of utterances mothers produced

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Interaction	25% (15)	39% (26)	66% (41)	90% (53)
Book Focus	5% ( 3)	2% ( 1)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)
Communicative Talk	52% (31)	32% (21)	32% (20)	10% ( 6)
Irrelevant talk	18% (11)	27% (18)	2% ( 1)	0% ( 0)
Total	100% (60)	100% (66)	100% (62)	100% (59)

Table 3 shows the types of interaction mothers had with their child. The interaction code has two categories: request information and provide information. Both mothers requested information when they read their children's familiar books. The American mother requested more information from her child while the Japanese mother provided more information.

Table 3

Types of mothers' interactions

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Request for information	73% (11)	58% (15)	17% ( 7)	43% (23)
Provide Information	27% ( 4)	42% (11)	83% (34)	57% (30)
Total	100% (15)	100% (26)	100% (41)	100% (53)

**Interaction: request for information**

Table 4 shows the types of requests the mothers made while reading. This category revealed several differences between the two mothers. The American mother focused on asking for location, asking for labeling, filling in the blanks, and predictions; 60% of her utterances were filling in the blanks. The following interaction is an example of filling in the blanks while reading A Very Hungry Caterpillar.

Example 1

MOT: On Monday he ate through one apple, but he was still hungry.

MOT: On Tuesday he ate through two pears but he was still...

CHI: Hungry.

MOT: Hungry.

MOT: On Wednesday he ate through three plums but he was...



CHI: Still hungry.

MOT: Still hungry.

MOT: On Thursday he ate through four strawberries but he was...

CHI: Still hungry.

MOT: Still hungry.

CHI: Still hungry.

MOT: Still hungry.

When the American mother read Play with Me, she used a similar approach of having her child fill in the blanks.

Table 4

Types of requests mothers made

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Location	18% ( 2)	40% ( 4)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)
Label	0% ( 0)	20% ( 2)	0% ( 0)	5% ( 1)
Fill in the blank	64% ( 7)	30% ( 3)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)
Predictions	18% ( 2)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)
Reason Explanations	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)	100% ( 7)	50% ( 10)
Emotion	0% ( 0)	10% ( 1)	0% ( 0)	45% ( 9)
Total	100% ( 11)	100% ( 11)	100% ( 7)	100% ( 20)

In contrast to the American mother, the Japanese mother focused on reason explanations, which require the child to think why a particular event occurred. The following interaction is an example. The main character in Play with Me wanted to play with animals in the forest, but when she tried to catch them, they ran away.

Example 2

MOT: Why do you think everybody runs away?

CHI: I don't know.

In this example, although the child did not understand why the animals ran away, the mother did not provide the answer. She also asked the following question when the animals came back to her because she did not try to catch them.

Example 3

MOT: Why do you think everybody comes back?

CHI: Although before before they ran away they came back.

MOT: Why?

CHI: Yes.

CHI: Because she was pitiful.

MOT: Because she looked pitiful?

MOT: I wonder if they think the girl was pitiful.

In Example 2, the mother did not provide the answer for the child. In Example 3, the mother disagreed with the child's answer, but did not continue the conversation about this topic.

In addition, she asked the child to express his emotion. As discussed earlier, empathy is an important aspect of child development in Japan. The mother inquired into the child's emotions or appealed to his empathy. In Example 4, the Japanese mother elicited the child's feelings about the story character when the little girl in Play with Me could not play with the forest animals. The mother tried to have the child empathize with the main character.

#### Example 4

MOT: If you were here what would you do?

MOT: If you were here what would you do?

MOT: Although it was good that everybody came back, if no one came back what would you do?

MOT: You say, "Will you play with me?"

MOT: They say, "No. "

MOT: You say, "Will you play with me?"

MOT: They say, "No. "

CHI: I will go and swim.

CHI: In the water.

MOT: Will you swim by yourself ?

MOT: Won't you feel lonely if you swim alone?

### **Types of question forms**

Table 5 shows the types of question forms the mothers used when they requested information. The American mother used both wh-questions and yes/no questions equally. The Japanese mother used more yes/no questions when she read Play with Me. She also changed the question form wh-questions to yes/no questions when the child could not answer the wh-question. The following example illustrates this process.

#### Example 5

MOT: Why do you think she is bad?

MOT: Why do you think she is bad?

CHI: Bad.

MOT: You don't know why she got caught?

MOT: You don't know why she was put in the basement like this?

CHI: No.

Table 5

Types of question forms mothers used

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Wh-questions	50% (3)	60% (3)	50% (4)	25% (4)
Yes/No questions	50% (3)	40% (2)	50% (4)	75% (12)
Total	100% (6)	100% (5)	100% (8)	100% (16)

**Interaction: provide information**

Table 6 shows the types of information the mothers provided during book-reading. The Japanese mother provided more information to her child, 30 utterances, while the American mother produced 11 utterances when reading the common book, Play with Me. Both mothers provided utterances which empathized with story characters or appealed to their children's emotions, but the Japanese mother produced more. Both also made efforts to scaffold the story. When the Japanese mother read The Lady and The Tramp, she made several utterances explaining the content of the story because her child did not understand why the Lady was trapped.

Table 6

Types of information mothers provided

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Labeling	0% (0)	27% (3)	6% (2)	0% (0)
Reason Explanations	50% (2)	36% (4)	76% (26)	47% (14)
Emotion or Empathy	25% (1)	18% (2)	9% (3)	37% (11)
Illustration	0% (0)	9% (1)	0% (0)	3% (1)
General knowledge	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	3% (1)
Vocabulary and language	0% (0)	9% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Text-Reader Link	25% (1)	0% (0)	9% (3)	10% (3)
Total	100% (4)	100% (11)	100% (34)	100% (30)

**Book focus**

Table 7 shows the number of utterances the mothers employed for the book-focus category. The Japanese mother did not provide any book-focus utterances. The English mother focused on the title and had her child read it. The following examples illustrate this interaction.

Example 6

MOT: What does it say?

CHI: Play With Me.

Example 7

MOT: This story is called "The Very Hungry Caterpillar."

Table 7

Types of book-focus

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Book knowledge	100% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Print knowledge	0% (0)	100% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Total	100% (3)	100% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)

**Communicative talk**

Table 8 shows the frequency of subcategories in the communicative talk. Both mothers tried to get their children's attention. However, when the Japanese mother read Play with Me she did not have to get the child's attention. This was probably because it was a new book to him and he was already interested in the story. The Japanese mother sometimes suspended her communication during the book-reading when she disagreed with the child's answer

Table 8

Types of mothers' communicative talk

	American mother		Japanese mother	
	Hungry	Play	Lady	Play
Acknowledgement	13% ( 4)	25% ( 5)	35% ( 6)	50% (3)
Correction	3% ( 1)	5% ( 1)	0% ( 0)	0% (0)
Suspended	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)	15% ( 3)	50% (3)
Attention getting	45% (14)	50% (10)	55% (11)	0% (0)
Directives	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)	0% (0)
Talking to Self	26% ( 8)	20% ( 4)	0% ( 0)	0% (0)
Prompting	13% ( 4)	0% ( 0)	0% ( 0)	0% (0)
Total	100% (31)	100% (20)	100% (20)	100% (6)

## **Interview results**

### **American mother**

The American mother said that her book-reading interaction for my study was typical. She always asks her son questions about the pages and animals, so he will stay interested. He likes to participate in joint book-readings by providing his knowledge, such as repeating letters and story lines. His father and grandmother also read stories to him. A bedtime story is routine. The mother provides a variety of books which are usually short and colorful. Her son likes books which have animal characters and he often chooses his familiar books. He could read along by heart even before he knew the written words. This mother believes that reading is the essence of the English language because it combines sentence structure, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, and so on. She also believes that books provide knowledge for life. Although English is the first language in the home, she wants her son to know Japanese because he is half Japanese. If they lived in Japan, he would definitely be able to read, write, and speak Japanese.

### **Japanese mother**

The Japanese mother said that she is the only person in her family who reads stories to her son in her family. She borrows books from the local library and her son receives books as gifts. She likes to read "cute stories" and stories which appeal to her feelings. She believes that in stories her son can meet characters whom he cannot meet in his ordinary life. She also believes that her son can increase his vocabulary through reading. Although she does not like to read herself, she wants her son to like books. Even though he does not read and write yet, he tries to write by imitating his older brothers.

## **Discussion**

As discussed earlier in the introduction, Snow and Ninio (1986) found that a child began to assume the adult role in frequently occurring situations such as reading a familiar book and acquired what was expected of him. I tried to examine the content of mothers' speech to children to find out what parents were trying to teach children through book-reading activities. Although it is impossible to generalize based on the small sample, I found that the American mother focused on language and reading while the Japanese mother focused on social interaction.

### **Interaction: request for information**

Examining the interaction code, I found a profound difference between the two moth-

ers: the American mother requested more information, while the Japanese mother provided more information than her counterpart. Examining the types of information both mothers requested, I found that many of the utterances of the American mother were filling in the blank (see Example 1 in the results section). I speculate that she tried to examine her child's understanding of the text by making him fill in the blanks, which requires the child understand a text.

On the other hand, the Japanese mother asked for reason explanations to examine the child's understanding (see Examples 2 and 3). Although she tried to elicit information from him, she did not give him feedback on his responses. In Example 2, the child did not understand why animals ran away, but she did not elaborate on this question. In Example 3, although she asked why the animals came back and disagreed with his answer, she did not develop a discussion with him on this matter. I speculate that her purpose in book-reading was to enjoy the story, not to argue with her child. Her attitude can be supported by Izumori's finding (1978). In a survey of Japanese parents of 274 five years olds, he found the following reasons why parents read books to children: "joy of reading" (81%); "imagination" (66%); "knowledge acquisition" (52%); "vocabulary" (20%); "discipline" (20%); and "affection" (19%). These results indicate that Japanese parents do not perceive that book reading is related as children's language and reading development except for vocabulary development.

### **Emotional development**

Another type of information the Japanese mother tried to elicit from her child was about his feelings. She asked how the child would feel if he were the main character in *Play with Me* (see Example 4). This question was not important in terms of understanding the story. However, it is important in Japanese children's empathy development. She was appealing to her child's emotions by putting him in the story character's position. Clancy (1987) found a similar approach found in the mothers she studied.

Lewis (1995) points out that Japanese children are expected to focus not only on academic development but also on emotional development in elementary school. She examined the course of study set by the Ministry of Education and found that Japanese children were encouraged to express how they felt about the subject matter as well as its content. For example, children are expected to be interested in language, to love music, to love their country and its history, and to love nature. Lewis described this approach as "wet" learning because teachers try to reach children emotionally when they teach these subjects. Lewis also found that Japanese elementary school teachers valued children's emotional development more than their academic achievement.

## **Book familiarity**

Book familiarity also affected mothers' speech during book-reading. In the interaction category, 83% of the Japanese mother's utterances with The Lady and The Tramp and 57% of her utterances with Play with Me were provided information. The result is quite opposite for the American mother who elicited more information from the child.

The American mother tried to elicit the child's understanding by having him answer questions, while the Japanese mother tried to make the child understand the story by providing information to him. I speculate that this difference was due to different cultural beliefs and different understandings of the purpose of book-reading.

For the American mother, I speculate that the child's autonomy as a reader was important. As her interview comments suggest, "reading is the essence of the English language"; she expects her child to become an independent reader and she provides important questions to help him learn the meaning of the reading. Although the sample was small, she produced several utterances which focused on book and print knowledge while the Japanese mother produced no such utterances.

On the other hand, for the Japanese mother, I speculate that becoming an independent reader is less important because learning to read is considered to be easy in Japan when compared to an alphabetic language like English. For several reasons learning to read is easier for Japanese children than for English-speaking children. First, the nature of the Japanese written language makes it easier for them to read (Muraishi, 1976; Kanaya, 1979; Sheridan, 1981; Mason, Anderson, Omura, Uchida, & Imai, 1989; Tamaoka, 1996). There are three writing systems in Japanese: *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji* characters. Children first learn to read *hiragana*, which has 46 characters. *Katakana*, which is used for loan words or foreign words, also has 46 characters. As both *hiragana* and *katakana* are syllabic, it is relatively easy for children to pronounce words because each letter corresponds to one sound.

Based on the discussion above, we can conclude that the American mother focused on her child's language and reading development, while the Japanese mother focused on her child's emotional development.

## **Implications for the future study**

In this project, I found differences in book-reading styles between the American mother and the Japanese mother. However, to draw firm conclusions would require more participants. It is also important to examine mother-child interactions across different ages because previous book-reading studies in the US suggest that mothers' book reading styles vary by child age (Heath, 1986; Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996). This research should shed

light on the great cultural diversity of reading practices in homes with preschool aged children.

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