

EXPOSURE TO WA AND GA IN L2 JAPANESE PEDAGOGY: COMPARISON
BETWEEN LEARNER INPUT AND L1 USAGE

日本語教育における「は」と「が」の偏り: 母語話者の使用頻度との比較

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1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding the difference between the topic particle *wa* and the case particle *ga* has been known to be difficult for learners of Japanese. Explanations such as *wa* is a marker of contrast (McGloin, 1989, etc.), and *ga* is used for new information (McGloin et al. 2013, etc.) are often provided for learners, but it is not easy for learners to fully comprehend the grammatical distinction between the two particles. In addition, as Russell (1985, 2005) claims, having the conscious knowledge of the grammatical rules about *wa* and *ga* does not necessarily ensure the correct usage of the particles in interactive situations.

In regards to the usage of *wa* and *ga* in Japanese language education, the author of the present study had been speculating that *wa* is disproportionately overused compared to *ga* by learners of Japanese. More precisely, the author had been under the impression that learners of Japanese tend to use *wa* where *ga* is expected to be used, and *wa*-marked noun phrases are often unnecessarily repeated in relatively simple grammatical structures such as *X wa Y desu*, which results in creating utterances with repeated *wa* as in *watashi wa daigakusei desu*, *watashi wa amerika jin desu* ‘I am a college student, I am American,’ etc.

One of the speculated causes for the over-usage of *wa* is the frequency of *wa* in teaching materials used in the classroom. As shown in Figure 1, teaching materials created for learners of Japanese seem to overuse *wa* by repeating the NP + *wa* structure frequently. Figure 1 is a grammar exercise for practicing the past-tense forms in an elementary level textbook, and the *wa*-marked *Mary-san wa...* ‘Mary is...’ is repeated in the exercise.

Figure 1: A sample grammar exercise in *Genki I*

Example: Q: メアリーさんは月曜日に何をしましたか。
げつようび なに

A: 図書館で勉強しました。
としょかん べんきょう

1. メアリーさんは水曜日に何をしましたか。
すいようび なに
2. メアリーさんは火曜日に何をしましたか。
かようび なに
3. メアリーさんはいつ映画を見ましたか。
えいが み
4. メアリーさんはいつ買い物をしましたか。
か もの
5. メアリーさんは金曜日にどこで晩ご飯を食べましたか。
きんようび どこで ばんごはん た
6. メアリーさんは木曜日にどこで友達に会いましたか。
もくようび どこで とも あ

(Banno et al., 2011, p. 121)

As exemplified in Figure 1, teaching materials developed for students of Japanese appear to overuse *wa*, and if the frequency is truly high, students' utterances as well as instructors' utterances may be affected by the high frequency of *wa*. However, as far as the author of the present study is aware, no studies have been conducted on the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in the materials used for teaching Japanese as a second language. In order to examine the possible over-usage of *wa* in Japanese language education, the present study conducted a comparative study between the frequency of *wa* and *ga* by L1 speakers of Japanese, and the particles' frequency in the materials used for teaching Japanese. Detailed information about the present study is provided in the next section.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study aims to find out whether or not *wa* is overused compared to *ga* in the materials developed for teaching Japanese compared to the usage by L1 speakers of Japanese. In order to conduct the comparison, the present study first examined the frequency of *wa* and *ga* used by L1 speakers of Japanese. In order to gain data on the usage of *wa* and *ga* by L1 speakers of Japanese, the present study examined two corpora that contain the data from naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese. The two corpora used are the *Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese* (Maekawa, 2003), and the *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus* (Ohso, 2003). For quantifying the number of cases of *wa* and *ga* in the corpora, the *Chunagon* search portal developed by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (<https://chunagon.ninjal.ac.jp>) was used.

After examining the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in utterances by L1 speakers of Japanese, the present study examined the usages of *wa* and *ga* in elementary- and intermediate-level textbooks. The two textbooks used for the analysis were *Genki I: An integrated course in elementary Japanese* (Banno et al., 2011) and *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* (Miura & McGloin, 2008). In the analysis of the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in those textbooks, all cases of *wa* and *ga* in conversational dialogues, explanations for grammar points, and the sections designed for in-class exercises were quantified and summarized. The sections for reading exercises were not included in the analysis.

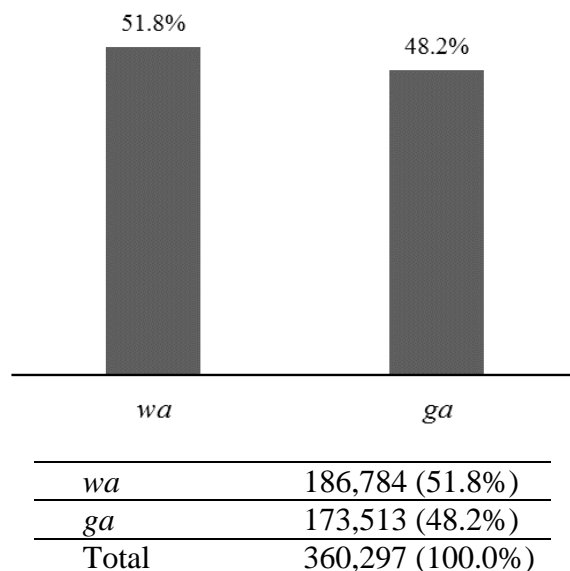
The reason for choosing to analyze textbooks instead of actual audio recordings of classes is due to the potential effects from the target grammar points for specific class sessions. For example, when a recorded class session covers a certain grammar point that heavily requires *wa* over *ga* or vice versa, the frequency of the particles is also heavily affected. In order to avoid this problem, the author of the present study chose to examine textbooks which essentially include all of the grammar points that are expected to be covered for the given learning level. After summarizing the data from naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers and textbooks for learners of Japanese, the results were compared and discussed. The following section will discuss the findings of the present study.

3. RESULTS

As the initial process of the comparison between L1 speakers and textbooks written for learners of Japanese, the present study examined the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in the *Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese* (CSJ). As mentioned earlier, CSJ is a linguistic corpus that contains the data from naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of

Japanese. In CSJ, 186,874 cases of *wa*, and 173,515 cases of *ga* were found. The frequency of *wa* and *ga* in CSJ is summarized in Figure 2.

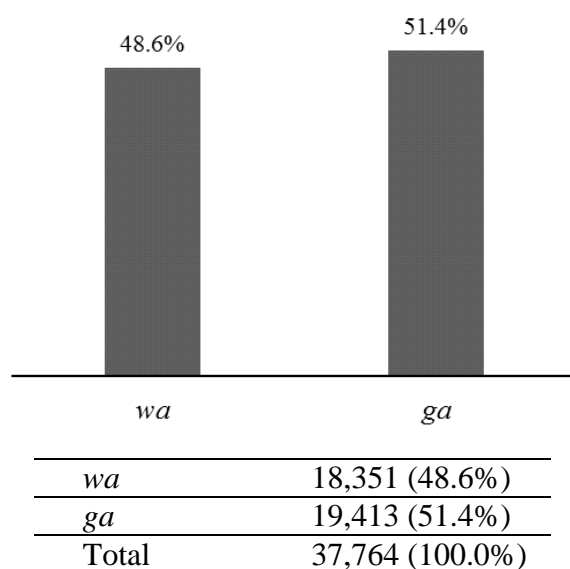
Figure 2: *wa* and *ga* in the *Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese*



As shown in Figure 2, the ratio between *wa* and *ga* in the *Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese* is approximately 1:1, which indicates that the frequency of *wa* and *ga* is approximately equal.

The present study also examined the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in the *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus* (NUCC). NUCC also contains data from naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese.

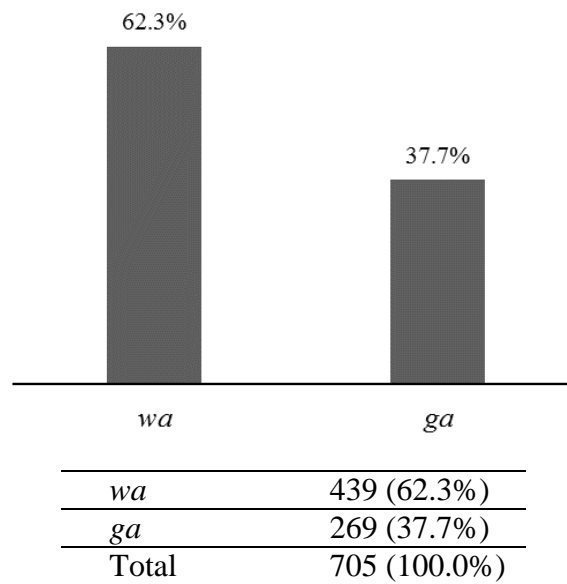
Figure 3: *wa* and *ga* in the *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus*



As summarized in Figure 3, the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in the *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus* is also approximately equal. Based on the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in the *Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese* and the *Nagoya University Conversation Corpus*, it seems that the frequency of *wa* and *ga* is approximately equal in naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers Japanese.

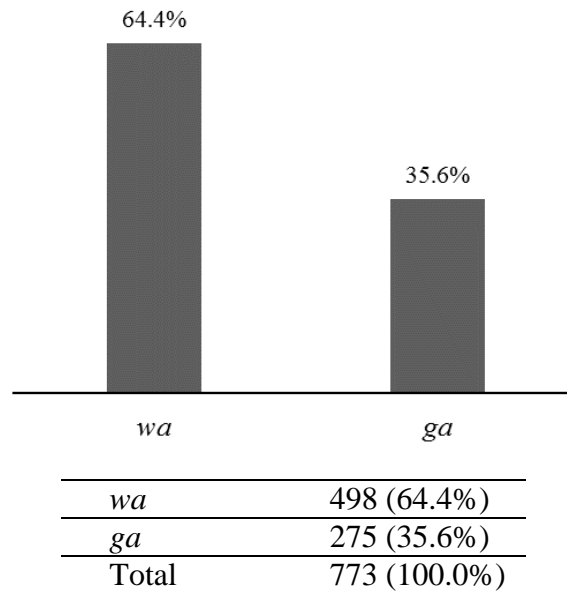
After the examination of the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese, the present study also examined the textbooks for learning Japanese as a second language. First, the usage of *wa* and *ga* in *Genki I: An integrated course in elementary Japanese*, which is an elementary-level textbook of Japanese, was quantified and summarized. The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: *wa* and *ga* in *Genki I: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese*



Contrary to the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese, *wa* is much more frequently used over *ga* in *Genki I*. The high frequency of *wa* in *Genki I* indicates that when students are learning from the teaching materials created based on *Genki I*, their exposure to *wa* may be disproportionately high compared to the frequency in naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese.

The present study also has examined the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese*, which is an intermediate-level textbook of Japanese. The results are summarized in Figure 5.

Figure 5: *wa* and *ga* in *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese*

Similar to the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in *Genki I*, *wa* is used disproportionately more frequently than *ga* in *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* compared to the data from naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese.

The following section will discuss and analyze the findings from the comparison between L1 conversations and the teaching materials for L2 speakers of Japanese.

4. DISCUSSION

The ratio between *wa* and *ga* was approximately 1:1 in both of the examined corpora of naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese. However, *wa* was more frequently used than *ga* in the elementary and intermediate-level textbooks examined for the present study. This finding indicates that when lesson plans are created in accordance with the contents of the textbooks, the exposure to *wa* and *ga* to students is also likely to be affected by the frequency of the particles in the textbooks.

The high frequency of *wa* over *ga* in the materials for teaching Japanese as a second language contrasts with the high frequency of *ga* among children whose L1 is Japanese. The studies by Hatano (1979), and Nakamura (1993) demonstrate that children whose L1 is Japanese acquire *ga* before *wa*, and they tend to overuse *ga* in early stages of acquiring Japanese as their L1. Therefore, the findings of the present study show that the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in the materials for teaching Japanese as a second language is the opposite of the pattern observed when Japanese is acquired as L1 by children.

As for the high frequency of *wa* over *ga* in *Genki I*, which is an elementary-level textbook for learners of Japanese, the timing of the introduction of the two particle may be an influential factor. That is, in *Genki I*, *wa* is introduced much earlier than *ga* is, and this difference in timing of introduction may have contributed to the high frequency of *wa* in *Genki I*. In addition, as mentioned in the introduction, the frequent usage of relatively simple sentence structures such as *X wa Y desu* in earlier chapters of *Genki I* might have caused the high frequency of *wa* over *ga*.

The frequency of *wa* was also high in *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese*. Since *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* is an intermediate-level textbook, the sentence structures used in the textbook is not limited to relatively simple structures as the ones used in *Genki I*. One possible cause of the high frequency of *wa* in *An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese* is the fact that sentences in textbooks tend to be shaped as complete sentences that often start with *X wa* to explicitly state the topic or theme of the sentence, while utterances in naturally occurring conversations tend to be more incomplete and fragmented.

In addition, another factor that may have contributed to the high frequency of *wa* in both of the examined textbooks is the lack of omissions of particles. It is recognized that certain particles such as *wa*, *ga*, and *o* can be omitted in the colloquial version of Japanese without modifying the propositional information in the sentence, resulting in the production of utterances such as *tomodachi kita* ‘my friend came’ and *ame futteiru* ‘it is raining’ (Tsujimura, 2007, etc.). Also, this type of omission of particles is not necessarily limited to the utterances in the so-called casual style conversations. As demonstrated by the acceptability of *tomodachi kimashita* ‘my friend came (polite style)’ and *ame futte imasu* ‘it is raining (polite style),’ certain particles can be also omitted in conversations in the polite style. Furthermore, as Suzuki (1995), and Lee (2002) point out, not using particles such as *wa*, *ga*, and *o* after a noun phrase may be the speaker’s active choice that has its own pragmatic function rather than a mere omission of the particle. For example, Suzuki (1995) argues that *wa*-marked phrases indicate major discourse boundaries, and phrases without any accompanied particles indicate minor discourse boundaries. Lee (2002) argues that not using a particle with a noun phrase has a property of presenting an attitude towards the listener in a strong and direct fashion.

On the other hand, in the sentences used in textbooks for learners of Japanese, noun phrases tend to be mostly accompanied with particles even when those sentences are used to exemplify the utterances in colloquial speeches in Japanese. Therefore, if students are only exposed to example sentences that mostly use a particle after each noun phrase, they may not acquire when and which types of particles can be omitted without sounding unnatural. Also, when students are not exposed to omissions of particles, they are also not exposed to the opportunities to learn about the pragmatic effects created from not using particles. In order to enhance the accurate usage of particles including the omission of particles, teachers of Japanese may have to include various example utterances with and without particles when they create their lesson plans. In addition, similar to what Cho et al. (2013) argue about teaching particle omissions in Korean language classes, it may also be beneficial to include some explicit instruction about particle omissions along with learning activities that highlight communicative functions in Japanese language classes.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study has explored the frequency of *wa* and *ga* in naturally occurring conversations by L1 speakers of Japanese, and elementary and intermediate-level textbooks for learning Japanese as a second language. The results of the present study indicate that even though the frequency of *wa* and *ga* is approximately equal in naturally occurring conversations, *wa* is much more frequently used than *ga* in the textbooks for learners of Japanese. This finding indicates that when teachers of Japanese create lesson

plans solely based on the textbooks written for learners of Japanese, students' exposure to *wa* and *ga* in the classroom may also be affected. The present study has only compared L1 usage of *wa* and *ga* with the usage of the particles in textbooks for learners of Japanese, but for future research, it may be highly beneficial to explore the actual usage of *wa* and *ga* by learners of Japanese in order to further examine how *wa* and *ga* are learned.

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