

# **Elicited Imitation tests for oral production assessment**

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## **1. Introduction**

The field of language acquisition and teaching has sought ways to examine learners' knowledge of target language system through various measures. Data from free conversation have been found to be problematic (Schachter 1974), as well as data from grammatical judgements (Chaudron 1983). Oral Proficiency Interviews by ACTFL (American Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages) requires extensive training for the "testers", and their judgement is based on their "Proficiency Guidelines" which are not necessarily checked for reliability against acquisition data (Yoshioka 1990). This paper will focus on another measurement, namely Elicited Imitation (EI) tests, which, for some unknown reason, are not widely utilized as the previously mentioned measures.

## **2. Elicited Imitation as a research tool**

EI was originally used as a research tool for children's first language (L1) acquisition based on the observations that children often seem quite capable of understanding what adults say, but their attempts to repeat what they hear does not accurately reproduce adult language. What children produce in imitation of adult speech was found to match their free production. This phenomena has been explained that aside from motor skills, children's L1 production is constricted by their production grammar, which is different from their comprehension grammar. Such manner of imitation led the researchers to believe that target structures can be prepared for children to repeat, and that the result would reflect their stage of L1 grammar development. The validity of EI for second language (L2) proficiency assessment has been supported by a number of researchers (Naiman 1974; Gallimore and Tharp 1981; Chaudron and Russell MS). After a careful analysis of a number of L1 and L2 EI test studies, Chaudron and Russell note "There appears to be a good basis for considering EI as a valid measure of linguistic competence in both L1 and SL studies." (p.26).

The first attempt to use EI for SLA research was done by Naiman (1974). While noting that there was a difference between learners' comprehension grammar and production grammar, Naiman suggested that the nature of his subjects' performance on particular target structure across tasks (translation, picture identification, and EI) were similar, suggesting the validity of EI. In his words, the difference is that "EI data represent a conservative estimate of second language comprehension skills and a non-conservative estimate of second language production skills." (p.1). He also suggested that EI data must be gathered with multiple performances on a given target structure.

This paper reports and contrasts the results of two similar EI tests conducted with learners of Japanese as a foreign language. The target structures of focus are Japanese particles, specifically, the particle *wa* for topic marking, the particle *ga* for subject marking, and the particle *o* for object marking (Martin 1975)<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. The studies

#### 3-1. Materials

In Study One, 40 Japanese sentences were prepared, so that they include various particles, verb forms, forms of negation, and word order<sup>2</sup>. The length of the sentences were made to be longer than average human short-term memory span<sup>3</sup>, so that the possibility of subjects' responding solely from memory without processing the sentences is minimized. These sentences were recorded by a male native Japanese speaker. A correlation has been found between the correctness of the repetition and the placement of the target structure in a given sentence (Naiman, also Grossman & Scholes 1971; Blasdel & Jensen 1970 cited in Naiman). Therefore, the location for each occurrence of a structure was recorded in order to investigate the location effect.

For Study Two, sentences in Study One were modified and 27 sentences<sup>4</sup> were prepared (see Appendix) in total, the length of which were from 20 to 25 syllables. The sentences formed a coherent short story. In order to investigate the location effect in the test sentences, the test sentences were constructed so that each of the three particles appeared at least five times total in the initial, medial, and final third part of the sentences. Some particles occurred more than five times in each part in order to maintain the naturalness of the sentences. Such excessive tokens were randomly deleted from the analysis, and only five tokens of each particle in each part were considered.

#### 3-2 Subjects

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<sup>1</sup> It is well known that these particles have multiple functions, but in these studies the functions were limited to one each as stated.

<sup>2</sup> The data in Study One were obtained at the Center for Second Language Classroom Research at University of Hawai'i at Manoa. See Yoshioka (1990) for more detailed analysis of the data.

<sup>3</sup> It is said that human short-term memory for verbatim recall seems to be limited to seven plus or minus two syllables. Naiman (1974) used 15 syllable sentences. Perkins, et al. (1986) found that second language learners tended to decrease in imitation ability after seven to eight syllables in the stimulus. Since Japanese is a syllable-timed language, one word tends to have more syllables than, say, English. It seems plausible that such a fact influences the performance of EI, especially when the learners rely on partial recall of a test sentence.

<sup>4</sup> In Study Two, the target structures were narrowed down to the three particles as opposed to the multiple structures in Study One, thus the total number of test sentences was smaller than in Study One.

The subjects for both studies had English L1 background, who were taking day-time Japanese courses for credit as a foreign language at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Study One involved first (n=9), second (n=6), and fourth-semester (n=8) (called Japanese 101, 102, 202 respectively) students.<sup>5</sup> The subjects in Study Two came from first (n=15), second (n=21), third (n=26) and fourth (n=8) semester Japanese classes, comprising of 25 males and 45 females<sup>6</sup> total. The data were gathered towards the end of a fall semester.

All of the subjects in Study One and Two used the same textbook in class, which introduced all the three target particles (for their usage chosen in this study) in the same lesson<sup>7</sup>.

### 3-3 Procedures

For Stud One, the EI test was conducted at one of the language laboratories of the Language Telecommunications and Learning Resource Center at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. The subjects volunteered their time outside of their Japanese class. They listened to 40 Japanese sentences, each of which were played twice. At the end of the second hearing which was signaled by a tone, the subjects attempted to repeat the sentence as closely to the original as they could. No note-taking was allowed while listening. The subjects were not told of the specific objectives of the test, but they did know that the results would not affect their course grades in neither positive, nor negative manner. Each test session lasted for approximately 30 minutes. All the instructions were read to the subjects in English.

At the initial contact for Study Two with the subjects in their Japanese classes, either the author or the instructor asked them to take part in this research, and their consent was obtained. At this time, the subjects were told that their performance in this research would not affect their course grades in neither negative nor positive manner. Also the objective of the research was explained roughly as the following:

"Many students find some features of Japanese more difficult than others. This may be because some features of Japanese are inherently more difficult than others, and are thus naturally acquired later. If this is the case, the materials in the syllabus should be ordered considering the difficulty hierarchy, in order to obtain maximum

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<sup>5</sup> Their levels were from beginning to roughly lower intermediate level. The textbooks used were Beginning Japanese I & II (Jorden 1963) to be covered by the end of 202. Classes met 50 minutes a day, Monday to Friday for 15 weeks per semester.

<sup>6</sup> The imbalance in the two sexes was inevitable since the overall number of female students far surpasses that of their male counterparts.

<sup>7</sup> This was lesson 4, which was taught in about the fourth week into Japanese 101.

learning efficiency. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether such an ordering hierarchy exists in Japanese."

The tests were conducted at the same location as in Study One. However, this time, some of the test sessions were conducted during a part of class time with the consent of the instructor, one class (approximately 15 students) at a time. Other sessions were conducted outside of the subjects' usual class time<sup>8</sup>. One session lasted approximately 30 minutes. All the instructions were read to the subjects in English. At the beginning of each session, the general purpose of the study was announced to the students.

### 3-4. Results and discussions

#### 3-4-1 Study One

Initially, the number of correctly repeated particles were tallied for each level group, as shown in Table 1. "Initial, medial, final" refer to the part of the sentence in which the particle occurred. In this study, the number of environments for each particle was not kept constant, thus the percentage of correctly repeated particles was obtained for comparison.

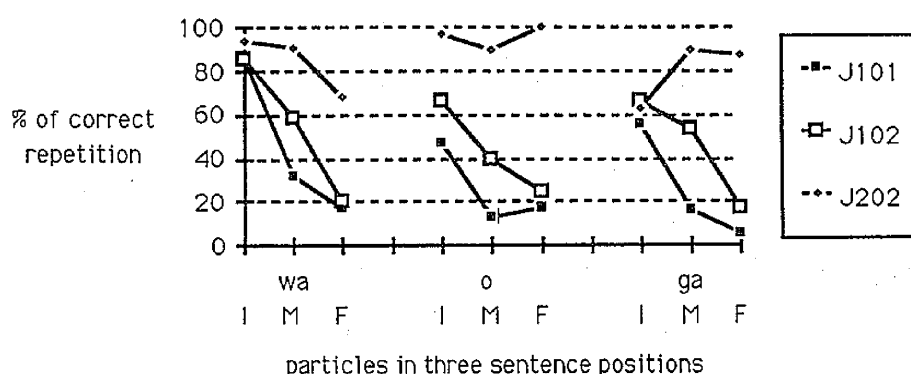
**Table 1 Study One results [raw figures] (n=24)**

		J1 (n=9)			J2 (n=6)			J4 (n=8)		
		context	tokens	%	context	tokens	%	context	tokens	%
initial	wa	153	130	85.0	102	87	85.3	136	128	94.1
	ga	9	5	55.6	6	4	66.7	8	5	62.5
	o	45	21	46.7	30	20	66.7	40	39	97.5
medial	wa	72	23	31.9	48	28	58.3	64	58	90.6
	ga	45	7	15.6	30	16	53.3	40	36	90.0
	o	45	6	13.3	30	12	40.0	40	36	90.0
final	wa	36	6	16.7	24	5	20.8	32	22	68.8
	ga	18	1	5.6	12	2	16.7	16	14	87.5
	o	18	3	16.7	12	3	25.0	16	16	100.0

Generally speaking, the successful repetition rate was higher for the higher levels. The sentence location factor is more apparent for the 101 and 102 levels; There is a trend for the initial position to be the easiest, and final position to be the most difficult to correctly repeat particles. Chart 1 shows a more visual picture of the effect. At the 202 level, the subjects show consistently successful performance, and no apparent sentence location factor is visible. However, since the performance of particle *o* is especially high (97.5, 90.0, and 100% for initial, medial and final parts), one has to consider the ceiling effect.

<sup>8</sup> In a strict sense, these students were true volunteers as opposed to those subjects who participated in the study during their regular class hours. However, there were not enough of the former subjects to make any comparison of the two groups meaningful.

Chart 1 Study One: Sentence position effects across levels

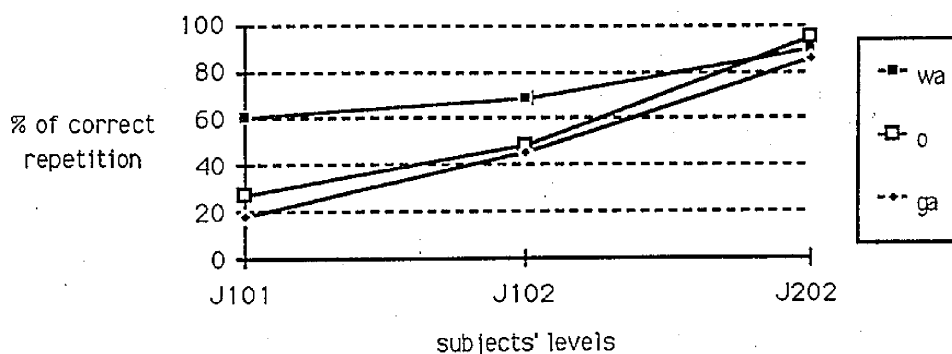


In order to obtain the general trend of particle repetition among the three levels, the figures for the three positions were collapsed (See Table 2 and Chart 2).

Table 2 Study One: Particle repetition results across levels

levels	101	102	202
wa	60.9	68.9	89.6
ga	23.6	45.8	85.9
o	27.7	48.6	94.7

Chart 2 Study One: Average result of particle repetition



The initial ease of the particle *wa* over other two particles disappear by level 202, and the particle *o* takes over. The initial ease of *wa* may reflect the subjects' strategy to overuse *wa* for agent marking, as seen among many learners. However, since *ga* can also mark agent, a competition arises with *wa* in learners' interlanguage. On the other hand, *o* is a

dominant object marker, even though it is not the sole object marker, which makes its case assignment relatively clearer. This may be the reason why the particle *o* enjoys the most successful result. Note that the figure for the initial position *o* is lower than the initial position *wa*, but the final position *o* is higher than the final position *wa*. A similar trend is seen in Study Two. The reasoning for this is given in Study Two section. The initial relative ease of *wa* over *o* is interesting. One might consider that agent marking is initially easier to process than patient marking<sup>9</sup>.

### 3-4-2 Study Two

There are some notable differences in the data gathered in Study Two. Firstly, since the target structure was narrowed down to the three particles, it was possible to control for the environments for the particles so that they were to occur the same number of times across three different (initial, medial and final) positions. Also, it was noticed that the usage of the particle *ga* included some object marking, in addition to the subject marking, thus they were tallied separately. Lastly, additional level (201) of learners was involved. The raw figures are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 Study Two results [raw figures] (n=46)**

	101			102			201			202		
	T.*	E.**	%	T.	E.	%	T.	E.	%	T.	E.	%
I-wa	34	55	61.8	36	65	55.4	55	70	78.6	27	40	67.5
-ga	8	55	14.5	14	65	21.5	21	70	30.0	12	40	30.0
-o	15	55	27.2	25	65	38.5	39	70	55.7	25	40	62.5
Mwa	30	55	54.5	14	65	21.5	32	70	45.7	20	40	50.0
-ga	2	33	6.0	8	39	20.5	20	42	47.6	9	24	37.5
-o	14	55	25.5	17	65	26.2	38	70	54.3	28	40	70.0
F-wa	3	55	5.5	5	65	7.7	16	70	22.9	10	40	25.0
-ga	1	33	1.8	0	39	0	3	42	7.1	2	24	16.7
-o	9	55	16.4	15	65	23.1	34	70	48.6	19	40	47.5

\*=actual tokens \*\*=number of possible environment

I=Initial, M=Medial, F=Final (position in test sentence)

Similarly to Study One, sentence position effects were investigated (See Chart 3). The pattern of the particle *wa* is quite similar to the pattern as in Study One, showing the ease of repetition in the order of sentence initial, medial and then final position. This tendency was not as clear in the particle *ga*, but an interesting trend is seen in common between the two studies. In the lower levels, the initial position shows better results, but in the higher levels the medial position does. The reason for this is unknown. However, the fact that both studies (with different test sentences) show similar trend is notable.

<sup>9</sup> See, however, Urakami (1984), who reports a psycholinguistic experiment using L1 Japanese speakers. She concludes that "Of different case-relations, the Objective is the strongest." (p.152).

Looking at the average results of the particle repetition across levels, Study Two shows another similar trend with Study One (compare Charts 2 and 4). The performance of *wa* exceeds the other two at 101 level, but *o* takes over around 102 level. In Study One the taking over occurred somewhere between 102 and 202.

Chart 3 Study Two: Sentence position effects across levels

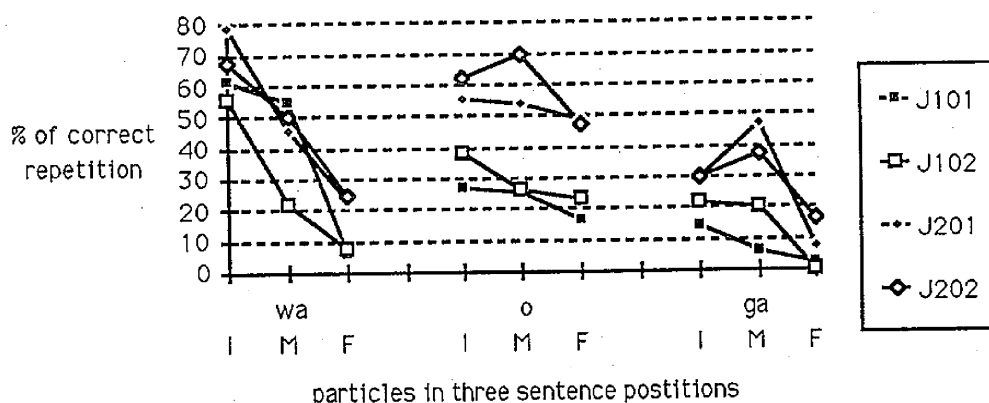
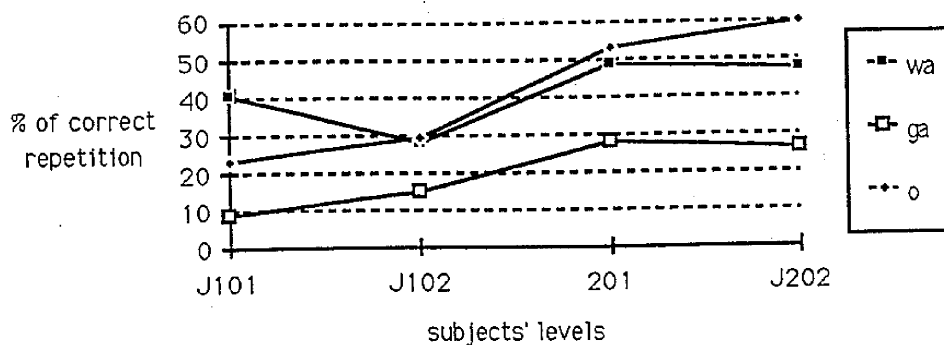


Table 4 Study Two: Particle repetition results across levels

levels	101	102	201	202
wa	40.6	28.2	49.0	47.5
ga	9.1	15.4	28.6	26.1
o	23.0	29.2	52.9	60.0

Chart 4 Study Two: Average results of particle repetition



A two-way chi-square test was carried out to investigate the effect of sentence location. Table 5 shows the overall results with token numbers and percentage of correct replies. A significant difference was seen in particle occurrence among positions ( $\chi^2 = 74.74$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

**TABLE 5 Study Two: Sentence location effects (Total) (n=46)**

	<i>wa</i>			<i>o</i>			<i>ga</i> (subj. use)			<i>ga</i> (obj. use)		
	*no.	†env.	%	no.	env.	%	no.	env.	%	no.	env.	%
Initial	152	230	66.1	104	230	45.2	75	230	32.6	0	0	NA
Medial	96	230	41.7	97	230	42.2	39	138	28.3	10	92	10.9
Final	34	230	14.8	77	230	33.5	29	138	21.0	8	92	5.8

\*=actual token number

†=total possible tokens of the environment

%=actual tokens of correctly repeated particles/ total tokens

(Initial x Medial x Final,  $\chi^2 = 49.22$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .005$ )

Next, each particle was investigated separately for a closer look. The performance of the topic marker *wa* for the initial position was found to be significantly better than medial, which was in turn significantly better than the final position ( $\chi^2 = 12.64$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ , and  $\chi^2 = 29.57$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ , respectively). The object marker *o* showed that initial position was repeated significantly better than final ( $\chi^2 = 4.03$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while the medial position was not significantly different from either initial or final position. The subject use of *ga* also showed that initial position was better than medial ( $\chi^2 = 10.74$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ ), and final ( $\chi^2 = 19.47$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ ) positions. The figures for *ga* functioning as an object marker need to be treated with caution since the total tokens are very small, and furthermore there was no environment in the initial position. No significant difference was found between the medial and the final positions.

A detailed look revealed that there was a large number of occurrences of the existential use of *ga* within the subject use<sup>10</sup>. A relatively large number of occurrence of the existential use of *ga* (49 tokens) may skew the results. In order to avoid the possible skewing of the results, the position effect was recalculated excluding such use of *ga*. The initial position was still significantly better than the final ( $\chi^2 = 55$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ ), and the medial position was also significantly better than the final position ( $\chi^2 = 37.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .005$ ).

<sup>10</sup> They were, 1) ...okane *ga* attara ..., '...if there is money...' (initial),  
2) ...gakkoo *ga* arimasu, '...there is a school' (final),  
3) ...hon *ga* arimashita, '...there was a book' (final),  
4) ...kita koto *ga* arimasendeshita, '...never been there' (final).



**TABLE 6 Study Two: Contrasting the three *ga* categories in the Elicited Imitation test**

	<i>ga</i> (subject)			<i>ga</i> (existential)			<i>ga</i> (object)		
	*no.	†total	%	no.	total	%	no.	total	%
Initial	55	184	29.9	20	46	43.5	0	0	NA
Medial	39	138	28.3	0	0	NA	10	92	10.9
Final	0	0	NA	29	138	21.0	8	92	8.7

\*=actual tokens

†=total tokens possible

The tendency for the initial position to be more accurately repeated supports Naiman's (1974) results. In his study, the ease of repetition was, from the easiest, initial > final > medial. However, in the present study the order of medial and final positions was reversed: Table 3 shows that the occurrence of correct repetition was more frequent in the medial position than the final across all three particles and across all four levels, even though the difference was not significant. In general, these results indicate that the position of target linguistic items in a sentence does play a role in determining the ease of repetition. The initial position was found to be easier to repeat than the final position, but no clear indication was seen as to the ease of repetition for the medial position. The tendency found in this study is, from the easiest to the most difficult, initial > medial > final positions.

A more detailed look at the ease of repetition for the initial position than the final is in order. Taking a look across particles to compare the tendency of initial being easier, we find the following: The tendency for such hierarchy is stronger in the order of 1) *wa* as well as subject use of *ga* ( $p < .005$ ), then 2) object use of *ga* ( $p < .025$ ), and finally 3) *o* ( $p < .05$ ). What this suggests is that, even though all of these particles seemed to be influenced by the saliency of the initial position, such influence was not equally strong. The difference may be due to the interplay between the saliency of the position and the expected *canonical position* of the particle<sup>11</sup>. For example, in the case of *wa* and the subject use of *ga*, both of which occur with the topic or the subject of sentence, sentence initial is the expected position in the Japanese canonical SOV ordering. Their occurrence in sentence initial position matches the subjects' expectation, making them easy to process. The saliency of sentence initial position simply adds to the ease of retention and consequent repetition. On the other hand, in the case of the object use of *ga* and the object marker *o*, the canonical and thus expected position is not in the sentence initial position, but rather after the subject or the topic noun phrase. In other words, sentence initial is not the expected position for these two particles. Thus

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Toshiyuki Doi for suggesting this analysis. I am making an assumption here following Pienemann and Johnston (1987) that Ss have developed the sense of canonical ordering of Japanese to a certain degree by the time of the study.

their appearance in sentence initial violates the subjects' expectation. It is conceivable that such violation of expectations competes with the general saliency of sentence initial position, and results in less successful retention and repetition.

This reasoning may explain why the object marker *o* showed the weakest difference between the initial and the final position. Since the canonical position of *o* is at the later position of a sentence, the occurrence in the final position matches the expectation of the Ss. If the saliency of sentence initial competes with violation of canonical ordering, and the saliency of sentence final matches the canonical position, naturally the relative performance difference between initial and final positions for *o* would be smaller than that for *wa* and the subject use of *ga*.<sup>12</sup> The object use of *ga* may still be, for these Ss, at a stage where its semantic differentiation from the subject use is not complete, so that its position effect does not surface as clearly as for the 'pure' object marker *o*.

### 3. Conclusion

Even though the two EI tests investigated here involved different subjects and different test sentences, quite a number of similarities were found between the results. The target structures, i.e. the three particles, showed similar improvement of scores towards higher levels. During that process, what may be the influence of the interplay between the expected canonical ordering and the actual word order was visible in both of the studies. The location factor of particles within sentences was quite noticeable, and generally the initial position showed better performance across particles and levels. This trend was common in both studies. These results can be interpreted to be in support of the reliability of EI tests.

The results also indicate two technical aspects that one has to take into account when using Elicited Imitation test to assess learners' oral production. Firstly, and this may be the more difficult of the two, one may have to consider the canonical ordering of the learners' L1. This is especially true when the target items include case markers, as in the present study. Secondly, in order to obtain an accurate picture of the learners' production grammar, the position of target items in a given sentence need to be controlled for so that they appear equally in, at least, the initial and the final half of the test sentences.

*This paper is based on a presentation made at the Sixth International Conference of the Institute of Language in Education, Education Department, Hong Kong, in December 1990. A revised version is being submitted for possible inclusion in the forthcoming proceedings of the conference.*

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<sup>12</sup> Recall that similar trend was seen in Study One.

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## APPENDIX

### STUDY TWO: ELICITED IMITATION TEST MATERIAL

(The break in each sentence indicate the three parts of the sentence. Also only the particles that were considered for analysis are in bold face. The English translation, of course, were not provided to the subjects.)

1. Keiko **wa** nijyuuissai / de ginkoo de / hataraitte imasu.  
'Keiko is twenty-one years old and works at a bank.'
2. Booifurendo ga hi / tori imasu ga mada kek / kon **wa** shite imasen.  
'(She) has one boyfriend, but is not married yet.'
3. Itsumo Keiko **wa** den / sha de ginkoo ni ikimasu ga ichi / jikan kakarimasu.  
'Keiko always takes the train to go to the bank, and it takes one hour.'
4. Demo ie **ga** eki ka / ra chikai kara ame no / hi **wa** benri desu.  
'But the house is near the station so it is convenient on rainy days.'
5. Moshi okane **ga** / attara Keiko **wa** Ame / rika ni ikitai desu.  
'If (she) had money, Keiko wants to go to the U.S..'
6. Oneesan **ga** kyonen Pa / ri ni itta node Keiko mo gai / koku **ga** mitaino desu.  
'Since her older sister went to Paris last year Keiko also wants to see a foreign country.'
7. Amerika ni iku / ni **wa** eigo **ga** hanasena / kereba narimasen.  
'In order to go to the States one needs to be able to speak English.'
8. Keiko no ginkoo no / mae ni eikaiwa no / gakkoo **ga** arimasu.  
'There is an English conversation school in front of the bank Keiko works at.'
9. Kyonen kara eigo o / soko de benkyoo shitei / masu ga mada heta desu.  
'(She) has been learning (to speak) English there since last year, but (her English) is still not very good.'

10. Keiko no tomodachi no / Junko **wa** dansu no sen / sei **o** shiteimasu.  
'Keiko's friend, Junko, teaches dancing.'
11. Keiko **wa** Junko to / isshoni gaikoku ryo / koo **o** shitai desu.  
'Together with Junko, Keiko wants to travel abroad.'
12. Demo gaikoku no koto / **ga** wakaranai node ga / idobuuku **ga** irimasu.  
'However, not knowing anything about foreign countries, (they) need a guidebook.'
13. Keiko tachi wa shigoto / **ga** owatta ato de ho / nya ni ikimashita.  
'After work, Keiko (and Junko) went to a bookstore.'
14. Gaidobooku **o** mite be / nkyoo shita hoo **ga** i / i to omotta kara desu.  
'(They) thought it was a good idea to study with a guidebook.'
15. Goji goro ginko / **o o** dete honya made / **wa** gohun deshita.  
'(She) left the bank around five o'clock, and it took about five minutes to get to the bookstore.'
16. Junko wa honya ni ki / kimashita, "Nani ka ii gaidobu / kku **wa** arimasu ka.  
'Junko asked the storekeeper, "Is there a good guidebook?"'
17. Honya wa Junko ni ki / kareta node iroirona hon **o** mi / sete kuremashita.  
'Being asked by Junko the storekeeper showed (them) various books.'
18. "Toteko takai kono / gaidobuuku **wa**." to Kei / ko **wa** omoimashita.  
"Very expensive, this guidebook is." thought Keiko.'
19. Sukoshi takai keredo to / temo shashin no kireina / hon **ga** arimashita.  
'There was a book that was a little expensive but had beautiful photographs.'
20. Sono hon **ga** tote / mo yokatta kara so / re **o** kaimashita.  
'Since that book was so good, (they) bought it.'
21. Sugu sono hon **o** yomi / tai kara tonari no kissa / ten ni hairimashita.  
'Since (they) wanted to read that book immediately (they) went into the coffeeshop next door.'
22. Hutari wa yukku / ri menyuu **o** mite / kangaemashita.  
'The two took time looking at the menu and deciding.'
23. Keiko wa kono kissate / n ni imamade kita ko / to **ga** arimasendeshita.  
'Keiko had never been to this coffeeshop.'
24. "Keeki **o** tabeyou ka / onaka **ga** suita kara," to / Keko **wa** iimashita.  
'Why don't we have a piece of cake since we're hungry," said Keiko.'

25. Nodo ga kawaite i / ta kara Junko wa juu / su o nomimashita.  
'Since (she) was thirsty Junko had some juice.'
26. Hutari wa keeki o ta / betari ocha o nonda / ri shite hanashimashita.  
'The two talked eating cake and drinking tea.'
27. Shibarakushite to / kei o mite moo hachiji da / kara mise o demashita.  
'After a while they looked at (their) watch(es), and finding out it was already eight o'clock they left the shop.'