

The study of the response words in elements Japanese Textbooks

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Abstract

In the early stages of learning Japanese, students are introduced to the usage of the response words "hai" (yes) and "ee" (yeah). However, beginner-level textbooks often do not provide clear distinctions between "hai" and "ee," making it difficult for learners to understand when each should be used. "Ee" is found in these textbooks, but there is little explanation as to why "ee" is used in certain situations instead of "hai," and the conditions for its use are not clearly defined.

As a result, students may misuse these words, using them in inappropriate contexts. This leads to incorrect usage, which can hinder their ability to communicate naturally in Japanese. To address this issue, teachers should provide accurate and precise instruction on when and how to use "ee." This would help reduce learner errors and foster more natural communication in Japanese.

This paper aims to analyze the response words "hai" and "ee" in beginner-level Japanese textbooks, clarifying their usage, distinctions, and syntactic conditions. It also examines whether "ee" can serve as a substitute for "hai."

Keywords: Japanese language teaching techniques, The basic Japanese language learners

1. Introduction

Japanese learners at the beginner level are introduced to the response words "hai" and "ee." As seen in the following example sentences from beginner-level textbooks, the distinction between "hai" and "ee" is not always clear.

1 Do you like meat, Mary?

→ Hai, I like it. / Iie, I don't like it.

2 Is the Japanese class difficult?

→ Ee, it is difficult. / Iie, it is not difficult. (Genki, Chapter 5)

Kitagawa (1977) suggests that "hai" is a recognition response, while "ee" indicates agreement. However, beginner-level Japanese textbooks typically explain "hai" as a polite and formal "yes" and "ee" as a more casual response akin to "yeah." Furthermore, Hyuga (1980) notes that "ee" is rarely used in response to commands, as in the following example:

3Do your homework.

→ Hai. /Ee. (Original sentence)

Even dictionaries do not clearly differentiate between the two. For instance, the Shogakukan Digital Daijisen defines "hai" as "a word used in somewhat formal situations, (a) to respond when called, 'Hai, Nakamura speaking,' or (b) to express affirmation or agreement in response to a question or suggestion," and "ee" as "a word uttered to express affirmation or agreement, similar to 'hai,' as in 'Ee, let's go home together.'" It is clear from previous research that the difference between "hai" and "ee" is not merely about politeness.

Ninomiya and Kanayama (2006) also point out that for learners, understanding the difference between "hai" and "ee" is challenging. For example:

4Tanaka: John, may I eat this?

John: Hai, please go ahead.

5John: Tanaka, may I sit here?

Tanaka: Ee, please go ahead. (NIHONGO FUN & EASY, Chapter 6)

In examples (4) and (5), "ee" is used in beginner-level textbooks, but there is little explanation of why "ee" is used instead of "hai" in these situations. The conditions under which "ee" should be used are not clearly defined, which can lead learners to misuse it.

Therefore, providing precise instruction when teaching "ee" can help reduce misuse and lead to more natural Japanese. This paper aims to reduce learners' misuse by extracting the response words "hai" and "ee" from beginner-level Japanese textbooks, clarifying their usage, distinction, and syntactic conditions, and examining whether "ee" can substitute for "hai."

1.1 Research Objective

In this section, we will examine the meaning and function of "hai" and "ee."

"Hai" and "Ee" as Aizuchi (Backchanneling)

"Ee" is frequently used as an aizuchi, a backchanneling word, and it is important to distinguish this use from "ee" as a response word. Based on previous research, the definitions of "aizuchi" and "response words" in this paper are as follows:

Aizuchi: A signal indicating that the listener is paying attention to the speaker and helping to facilitate the flow of conversation. It can be used even while the speaker is still talking. Words like "hai, hai" or "ee, ee" can be used consecutively as aizuchi.

Response Words: Unlike aizuchi, a response can be considered a speech act that "claims the right to speak." A response occurs when the speaker's utterance seeks some form of information, and the listener reacts accordingly.

In this paper, "hai/ee" used during speech or as a signal of "I'm listening" is defined as aizuchi, while responses to preceding statements that involve interaction with the speaker are considered response words. The speaker who asks questions is referred to as the "speaker," and the person who responds with "hai" or "ee" is referred to as the "responder."

1.2 The Meaning and Function of "Hai" and "Ee"

Based on previous research, the differences between "hai" and "ee" can be summarized in Table 1. Key points that I would like to emphasize are underlined>.

Table 1: "Differences Between 'Hai' and 'Ee' in Previous Research"

Researcher	"Hai"	"Ee"
Kitagawa (1977)	Recognition response with respect for the speaker's utterance.	Agreement response based on the responder's personal feelings.
Hyuga (1980)	Used when recognizing information from the speaker. "Hai" has a proactive function, contributing to the establishment and maintenance of the discourse situation. Often used in response to informational or imperative sentences.	Used as an agreement or sympathetic response, often accompanied by "ne" in the preceding sentence. "Ee" implies "I think so too."
Ninomiya & Kanayama (2006)	Cognitive response.	Reflects the responder's emotions and is often used when mutual understanding or shared information is present between the speaker and responder. Cannot be used in response to commands or instructions.

As seen in Table 1, previous research reveals that "hai" is generally used as a cognitive response, while "ee" is more of an agreement or sympathetic response that reflects the responder's feelings. "Ee" is often used when there is shared information between the speaker and responder, especially when the preceding sentence ends with "ne." Moreover, since "ee" conveys agreement, it is inappropriate to use it in response to commands or directives, where the speaker is not seeking a response.

One condition for using "ee" is the assumption of shared information between the speaker and responder. When there is no such shared information, "hai" is more appropriate. However, the degree of shared information required is not clearly defined in previous research.

Thus, the explanations provided in existing studies about the differences between "hai" and "ee" are insufficient when teaching learners. For example, when "ee" is used in response to a question like "Do you like apples?" in a textbook, it is difficult to explain why "ee" is used instead of "hai" within the framework of agreement, sympathy, or shared information.

1.3 "Hai" and "Ee" in Textbooks

The response words "hai" and "ee" are introduced relatively early in Japanese language education. These words tend to be frequently used in conversation. Therefore, this paper examines how the usage of "hai" and "ee" is explained in seven beginner-level Japanese textbooks that contain relatively abundant conversation practice: Minna no Nihongo I, Dekiru Nihongo, Tsunagu Nihongo Shokyu 1, Genki I, Youkoso, NIHONGO FUN & EASY, and Sogo Nihongo.

Table 2: Explanation of "Hai" and "Ee" in Beginner-Level Textbooks

Textbook	"Hai"	"Ee"
Minna no Nihongo I	Used for affirmative responses.	None.
Dekiru Nihongo	Used for affirmative responses.	None.
Tsunagu Nihongo Shokyu I	"Yes"	"Yes, yeah."
Genki I	"Yes" in response to yes-no questions. "Hai" is also used when responding to a knock at the door or when one's name is called, meaning "Here." (Ee cannot be used in this case.)	"Yes" in response to yes-no questions. "Ee" is more conversational and relaxed than "hai." In informal situations, "un" is used.
Youkoso	"Yes."	"Yes."
NIHONGO FUN & EASY	"Yes."	"Yes."
Sogo Nihongo	Both "hai" and "ee" are used to express agreement with the speaker's question. "Hai" is more formal and polite than "ee."	"Yes."

As stated earlier, the explanations for "hai" and "ee" in beginner-level Japanese textbooks are limited. In many cases, "ee" is described as simply another form of "yes," similar to "hai." For

example, Tsunagu Nihongo defines "ee" as "yeah," and Genki I describes "ee" as a more casual expression than "hai."

In Youkoso, phrases such as "Yes, that's right." are translated as "Ee, sou desu ne" and "Yes, I will" as "Ee, sou shimasu." However, it would also be possible to use "hai" in these sentences, such as "Hai, sou desu ne" or "Hai, sou shimasu," which makes it difficult to grasp the difference between the two.

As noted in previous research, there is no clear explanation regarding the fact that "ee" cannot be used in response to commands. This makes it difficult for Japanese learners to understand how to distinguish between "hai" and "ee."

In this paper, I examine example sentences containing "hai" and "ee" from seven beginner-level Japanese textbooks: Minna no Nihongo I, Dekiru Nihongo, Tsunagu Nihongo Shokyu 1, Genki I, Youkoso, NIHONGO FUN & EASY, and Sogo Nihongo. By analyzing the meaning, sentence patterns, and context of the preceding sentences, I aim to clarify the conditions under which "ee" is more likely to be used and to distinguish the usage of "hai" and "ee."

2. Results

For instance, Minna no Nihongo I contains 109 instances of "hai" and 68 instances of "ee" (177 in total), making it the textbook with the highest total number of occurrences. This can be attributed to the textbook's focus on teaching all four language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—resulting in a larger variety of sentence patterns.

On the other hand, in Genki I, "hai" appears 23 times and "ee" 22 times, with little difference in the usage rate between the two. This is likely due to the high frequency of conversation practice included in the textbook compared to others.

Textbooks like Dekiru Nihongo, Tsunagu Nihongo Shokyu I, and NIHONGO FUN & EASY, which are more communication-focused, show a higher usage of "hai" and less frequent use of "ee." Meanwhile, Youkoso shows a much higher rate of "ee" usage (78%) compared to "hai." This can be attributed to the textbook's emphasis on conversation scenarios between close relationships. In more formal settings, such as job interviews or company visits, "hai" is more prevalent.

In Sogo Nihongo, "ee" is used more frequently (66%) than "hai" (34%). This could be due to the longer and more conversational interactions between characters in each chapter, making the use of "ee" more natural in these contexts. The article must be divided into chapters.

2.1 Analysis Based on Sentence Patterns

Next, an analysis of the example sentences containing "hai" and "ee" was conducted, referring to Hyuga's (1980) classification. The analysis of the preceding sentence's function revealed that the distinction between "hai" and "ee" goes beyond differences in politeness or shared information, as previously described in the literature.

"Ee" is more likely to be used when the responder shares a high level of information with the speaker or when the responder is less certain about their own statement. Although it is unnatural to use "ee" as a standalone response, adding a reason such as "-n desu" or an acknowledgment like "Wakarimashita" after "ee" increases the naturalness of its usage.

However, in formal situations, hierarchical relationships, or in response to clear commands (such as at a store checkout where a price is announced), "hai" is preferred.

In many sentence patterns related to requests or suggestions, "ee, ii desu yo" (Yes, that's fine) and "Sumimasen, chotto..." (Sorry, but...) are often paired together, making "ee" more appropriate in these contexts. When teaching learners about "ee," instructors should explain these points in detail.

2.2 Contextual Analysis

From the examples where "ee" was used, it was found that "ee" is rarely used at the beginning of a conversation. This is likely because "ee" is used when there is already some shared information between the speaker and responder, making it easier to give an affirmative response. As Ninomiya and Kanayama (2006) also pointed out, the use of "ee" presupposes shared information between the speaker and responder, though the degree of shared information is not explicitly mentioned.

In one-on-one conversations where there is less shared information, "hai" is more likely to be used. This suggests that as the conversation progresses and the level of shared information increases, the use of "ee" becomes more natural.

3. Conclusion

To reduce the misuse of "ee" by learners, it is important for instructors to provide appropriate guidance when teaching this word. The explanations provided in beginner-level textbooks are insufficient, so teachers should include the following points when explaining the difference between "hai" and "ee":

In response to commands or in hierarchical relationships (such as between a superior and a subordinate), "hai" is the preferred response.

Using "ee" allows the speaker to express agreement or that they share the same opinion as the other person.

"Ee" is often used in contexts where the speaker and responder share mutual understanding or information. For example:

"Is your older sister married?" → "Hai, she is married."

"Is Tanaka-san married?" → "Ee, I think she is married."

In addition, since "hai" is a response word that clearly expresses affirmation, it is well-suited for one-on-one conversation practice. Therefore, during lessons or self-introductions, using "hai" can help ensure smoother classroom interactions. However, because "hai" is primarily a cognitive response, it doesn't always express agreement or empathy clearly. In contrast, using "ee" allows the responder to express sympathy, agreement, or shared understanding, making it an essential word for effective communication.

In conversation practice, particularly in pair work, using "ee" can help increase the degree of shared understanding between speakers, making the conversation flow more naturally.

However, in situations with absolute hierarchies or when there's no need for agreement (such as when confirming prices), "hai" is the more appropriate response.

Additionally, responding with just "ee" alone is often unnatural. To make responses more natural, "ee" should be followed by further acknowledgment or understanding, such as:

"Ee, I understand."

"Ee, how can I help?"

"Ee, is that so?"

By explaining these nuances to learners, instructors can help reduce misuse of "ee" and guide students toward more natural communication.

This paper has clarified the usage of "hai" and "ee" in beginner-level Japanese textbooks and identified the contexts where "ee" is more likely to be used. The key findings are as follows:

Both "hai" and "ee" are used in affirmative responses, but their distinctions go beyond levels of politeness or formalities.

While "ee" can sometimes be substituted for "hai" in certain contexts, there are situations where they are not interchangeable. "Ee" is often used to express agreement, while "hai" may not convey this sense of agreement as clearly. "Ee" is more likely to be used when the speaker and responder share common information, leading to more natural conversations. On the other hand, "hai" is typically used when the responder's statement is more objective, whereas "ee" is used in more subjective responses.

Instructors should carefully explain the distinctions between "hai" and "ee" during lessons to help learners better understand when to use each response word. Additionally, instructors should emphasize the importance of shared information when using "ee" to ensure learners use it naturally in conversations.

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