# Japanese University Learners' Foreign Language Writing Anxiety

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## Abstract

This paper explores foreign language writing anxiety among Japanese university students enrolled in a compulsory English academic writing course which was taught online for an indefinite period of time due to the COVID-19 virus. All students were English majors and were taking either a second or third-year writing course taught by the author. The courses were taught online using Zoom and Google Classroom and the study addresses language learners' anxiety in both online and offline writing since students completed some writing tasks online during class and other tasks offline as homework. This study began with an initial reflection given to students as a preliminary task prior to the beginning of the spring semester. Findings showed that students had feelings of anxiety in various aspects of their writing and this provided the motivation for the present study. The paper focuses on students' anxiety in second language writing and shows that they held strong views about their past experiences of writing and their expectations of the upcoming course.

## Introduction

This research is part of a larger study exploring students' views about second language writing. It was conducted at the beginning of the 2020 academic year as the university prepared to go online due to the COVID-19 virus. This study began with a reflection given to students which was part of the preliminary activities they were required to complete prior to beginning the semester online. The purpose of this reflection was to explore students' experiences about writing academic English and to gain an understanding of the concerns students may have prior to moving to an online mode of teaching. Findings from the reflection showed that students had experienced writing anxiety in their academic writing courses. Although students were not asked directly about anxiety in writing, it had emerged as a common theme throughout the preliminary reflection in both second- and third-year classes. The present study, therefore, aims to investigate anxiety among these writing students as they prepared for a semester online and after they had gained some experience in this new mode of learning. In the reflection, there were many references to anxiety when writing in English. Words such as "anxious", "fear", "worried" and "stress" appeared frequently in their reflections. To gain a deeper insight into

anxiety among students, a second reflection was given to students on completion of their first essay.

Both the second- and third-year writing courses taught by the author followed a process writing approach involving recursive and overlapping stages; students were expected to complete various prewriting activities such as freewriting, mind-mapping, brainstorming, and outlining, before moving on to drafting, peer-reviewing, revising, editing, and proofreading their writing.

**Literature Review**

Anxiety, among other affective variables, can have a great influence on learners' experiences in language classrooms. Research into language anxiety began a few decades ago with many of the studies focusing on anxiety in speaking in foreign language classrooms or on language learning in general and therefore did not target other language skills such as writing (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). In the following years, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted in the field of anxiety in second and foreign language classrooms. Research into anxiety in second language writing tends to focus on the negative impact that writing anxiety causes students such as the detrimental effect it can have on learners' performance and experience in writing classes including reduced levels of self-confidence (Hassan, 2001; Liu & Ni, 2015) and a reluctance to spend time on planning their writing assignments which is an important part of the process approach to writing. Many studies have also investigated the sources of writing anxiety (Cheng, 2004; Choi, 2013). Studies have shown that there are various sources of writing anxiety such as organizing and developing ideas during the writing process (Jawas, 2019), a lack of writing competence, or a perceived lack of writing competence, including a lack of grammatical knowledge and academic vocabulary (Yu, 2020), a fear of negative feedback from peers or their teacher (Abdel-Latif, 2015; Hislop & Stracke, 2017; Lu & Liu, 2011) and past experiences of receiving negative feedback.

**The Study**

**Context**

Participants in this study were all English majors enrolled in either a second or third-year compulsory academic writing course at a Japanese university. There were two second-year writing classes and two third-year writing classes. There were 20 students per class in the second-year writing course and 18 students per class in the third-year writing course and all four classes were taught by the author. In the second-year writing class, students wrote two

argument essays per semester. In the third-year writing class, students were required to write a thesis on a topic of their choice with approval from their teacher. The topic needed to be one that had had sufficient research, so that students were able to conduct a relevant literature review and one in which students could conduct their own original research in the form of a survey or interview. Classes were 90 minutes long and were held once a week on Zoom. Google Classroom was used by the teacher to post materials and to communicate important information to students who also uploaded their outlines and essay drafts to the site. A writing class in both courses would usually begin with 10 minutes freewriting, group discussion of the freewriting topic in breakout rooms, and introduction of the lesson focus by the teacher. The second half of the class would typically be in the form of a workshop with students working on their outlines or drafts with help and feedback from the teacher. Students were also required to share ideas about the topic they were researching and to discuss their main arguments.

**Data Instruments**

At the beginning of the spring semester, students were given a preliminary reflection to complete which they uploaded to Google Classroom (Appendix A). The reflection included general questions about students' perceptions of writing and their expectations for the upcoming semester. When reading students' responses to the reflection, the teacher noticed that students often expressed strong feelings of anxiety. She decided to give students a second reflection (Appendix B) around the middle of the semester which focused on students' concerns about writing in English and their feelings about online writing classes. Students completed the second reflection when they had completed the final version of their first piece of writing. Data were analyzed inductively. For the purpose of this paper, only those themes which are related to anxiety in second language writing are included. When presenting the findings, all quotes are written using the students' own words and have not been corrected. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

**Findings and Discussion**

The data analysis from the reflections revealed six main sources of students' anxiety: lack of writing ability, comparison with peers, feedback, fear of making mistakes, fear of plagiarism, and overcoming challenges.

*Lack of writing ability*

The main source of students' anxiety was their perceived lack of proficiency in various aspects of their ability in their writing skills. Specifically, students were anxious about their lack of knowledge in the following areas: vocabulary, grammar, organization, APA, and gathering sources:

> *I often made the vocabulary and grammatical mistakes and use the wrong way to write essay because I do not know much about the correct grammar, paragraph structure and essay structure. My sentences were short, lack of information or boring, so I worry that the reader could not have fun through reading my essay. [Sae]*

Students expressed their concerns that the reader would not enjoy reading their essay due to a lack of academic writing ability. Students were worried not only about the teacher reading their work, but also about their classmates reading and responding to their writing during the peer review. Students also wrote about their frustration at not being able to express themselves when writing in academic English: "I became anxious because it is difficult for me to write in academic English. For example, I always feel stress when I can't write what I want to convey things" [Noriko].

Students also wrote about how much longer it took for them to write in academic English with some students writing that it takes an "extremely long time." They also wrote about how different it is to everyday English which is the variety of English they are most accustomed to. However, sometimes anxiety was not due to their lack of ability in academic English, but to the difficulty in finding sources of information: "I am worried about references. We cannot go to the library to find references for writing because of coronavirus, and I am afraid I might be not able to find enough information" [Shun]. In addition to finding online sources, students in the writing program were strongly encouraged to visit the library to find books and journals on their topics, however, due to the pandemic, this was no longer possible. It was a common concern among students that they would not be able to find enough information on their topics on the internet. Some students explicitly said that there was a lack of English sources on the internet, although clearly this was not the case.

*Comparison with peers*

The second main source of students' anxiety was the tendency for them to compare their ability and level of proficiency with their peers. Students were very much aware of their own ability and wrote about how they compared unfavorably with their classmates. Comments like these frequently appeared in the reflections: "My friends are better than me at grammar" and "Especially, I am lack of vocabulary. My classmates know a lot". In addition to a perceived lack of grammar and vocabulary, some students referred to their lack of imagination and how this made writing essays difficult: "I have no imagination like my friends" [Yuri]. Yuri explained how she found writing essays difficult due to her lack of imagination and thought her writing was "boring". Students were also worried about not being able to write enough words in their freewriting or to reach the minimum number of words in their essay drafts. "My classmates write enough but I cannot. I realize that I am inferior to everyone" [Kensuke]. It is clear that students were continually comparing their ability and progress with their classmates. Surprisingly, this was a belief shared among both higher and lower level students.

*Feedback*

The third source of anxiety was regarding the feedback students received from both their teacher and their peers. In terms of teacher feedback, their concerns were that they would not be able to grasp the meaning of their feedback: "I'm anxious when I don't understand the teachers feedback" [Kento]. Students trusted the feedback from their teacher, although they worried that it would be too difficult for them to understand. However, they often viewed their peers' feedback as unreliable and comments like the following were common among students: "I worry my classmates' feedback is not reliable" [Nao]. Rather than regarding their classmates' feedback as useful and helpful, there was instead a tendency for students to mistrust peer feedback.

*Fear of making mistakes*

The fourth source of anxiety was the fear of making mistakes. Students wrote about how they worried about making mistakes in grammar, using incorrect words and making mistakes with APA in-text citations and referencing. Some students also had unrealistic expectations of themselves: "I think it is too difficult because I do not have perfect English writing skills. So I feel stress that I will make many mistakes" [Yuriko]. Students often wrote that they lacked the ability to write in academic English and some students wrote that their main goal was to develop perfect English academic writing skills.

*Fear of plagiarism*

The fifth source of students' anxiety in writing was their fear of plagiarism. Students were very concerned about using APA correctly: "In essay class we should use APA style, but I'm not used to writing in APA style. I use casual phrase when I speak English class and talk with friends, so APA is so difficult for me to use. I worry I will fail the essay" [Daiki]. Students wrote how difficult APA was for them since it is only ever used in academic writing and therefore was very unfamiliar for them, however, they did understand the importance of using APA in their writing. This can be seen in students' concern regarding accidental plagiarism and how worried they were that they may accidentally forget to use quotation marks when copying a sentence from a text. Some also worried that they may copy their friends' ideas: "I feel stress that I may forget to quote or copy my friends' ideas" [Yumi]. Students were very aware of the issue of plagiarism, but felt that they lacked the skills to avoid it.

*Overcoming challenges*

Although students expressed their anxiety about writing in academic English, the study also found that students were able to overcome some of these challenges. In some cases, students were motivated to spend more time revising their work. "I have less spelling mistakes. When I finish writing, I spend a lot of time reviewing my essay. I always review it, so I do not make carless mistakes" [Noriko]. Students expressed a willingness to improve their writing skills and comments such as "I will improve my writing skills" and "I want to turn my weaknesses into strengths" were found throughout both reflections.

Interestingly, students seemed to adapt very well to the online mode of teaching and there was little anxiety among students regarding the new online mode of learning. Some students wrote about their preference for online classes since the classes seemed to have fewer students and it seemed "less scary". Although the number of students in the classes was similar to previous years, students seemed to feel that the classes were smaller and less threatening than classroom lessons.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to the present study. First, data were only collected from two reflections therefore limiting the amount of data collected and were only collected at the beginning of the course and again half-way through the course. Reflections given throughout

the writing process could have yielded interesting data regarding whether students felt stress when they were not being evaluated, for example, during the early planning stages of their essay draft such as when they were freewriting, brainstorming ideas, and developing their thesis statement and essay outline. Also, regular reflections throughout the writing process may have revealed at what stages students experience higher levels of anxiety. Furthermore, all reflections were written by students in English; they may have been better able to articulate their feelings had they been allowed to write in Japanese.

**Conclusion**

The study showed that the students held strong views regarding the factors that made them anxious and that they had experienced anxiety about writing both prior to the start of the semester and while they were writing their first draft of the essay. Students' greatest concern was regarding their writing ability and how their writing would be received by their teacher and peers. They demonstrated an awareness that academic English is different to the variety of English that they use in everyday communication, however they believed that they lacked the knowledge and ability to write academic essays effectively. Furthermore, they worried about accidentally plagiarizing their classmates work or inadvertently copying others' drafts while they were sharing their work in breakout rooms. In addition, they also felt anxious concerning the reaction of their peers to their drafts. Although they worried about their peers reading their paper, there was a tendency among students to mistrust this feedback and did not consider it to be as reliable as that of teacher feedback. Despite this lack of trust in their peers' feedback, students compared themselves unfavorably to their classmates in terms of their ability in academic writing and viewed their peers as being superior to themselves regardless of their actual ability. Students also appeared to have unrealistic expectations of themselves and their learning objectives, with some students aiming for unattainable goals such as developing perfect academic writing skills. Clearly, students did not regard making mistakes as an important part of the learning process and a common source of anxiety was a fear of making mistakes. Although students were worried about several aspects of writing in a second language, this anxiety was not always a negative influence on learners' experiences in second language learning. At times, being aware of this anxiety helped students to overcome it and provided them with the motivation to improve their writing.

**BIO DATA**

**Jane Hislop** teaches English at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and an MA in Linguistics (TESOL). She has also taught English at universities in New Zealand and the United Arab Emirates. Her research interests include second language writing, peer review, anxiety in language learning, and learner beliefs.

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**Appendix A**

**REFLECTION 1**

*Give your answers to the following questions. Please give as many details as you can.*

1. How do you feel about writing in Japanese?

2. How do you feel about writing in English?

3. What are your strengths when writing in English?

4. What are your weaknesses when writing in English?

5. What do you like best about writing in English?

6. What do you like the least about writing in English?

7. What are you looking forward to the most about having an online Writing course this semester?

8. What are you least looking forward to about having an online Writing course this semester?

**Appendix B**

**REFLECTION 2**

1. What are your main concerns about writing in English?

2. Would you prefer to have a writing class online or in the classroom?

3. Any other comments?