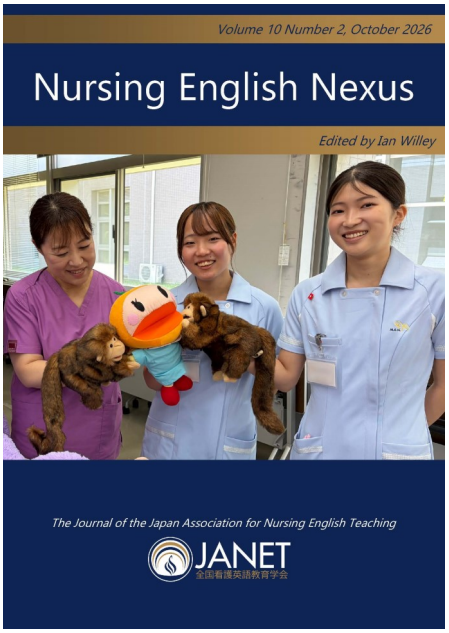
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An Investigation of Levels and Subtypes of Second Language Writing Anxiety in Japanese Nursing Students

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***Abstract**: Anxiety has long been recognized as an important affective variable in second language (L2) acquisition. While early research produced inconsistent findings, the development of situation-specific instruments such as the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) has enabled more precise investigation of anxiety within specific language skills. The present study examines the levels and types of foreign language writing anxiety among Japanese second-year nursing students. A total of 34 students enrolled in a compulsory English course completed the SLWAI prior to the start of the 2025 academic year. The instrument measures three dimensions of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior, and somatic anxiety. Descriptive statistics were analyzed using classification criteria proposed by Zhang (2011). Results indicate that 79.4% of participants experienced high levels of L2 writing anxiety, with no students falling into the low-anxiety category. Cognitive anxiety emerged as the most prevalent subtype, followed by avoidance behavior and somatic anxiety. These findings highlight the pedagogical importance of addressing cognitive, behavioral, and physiological dimensions of anxiety in order to support L2 writing development in EFL nursing education contexts.*

Keywords: English as a foreign language; nursing students; second language writing anxiety; SLWAI

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The role of anxiety in second language (L2) acquisition has been a longstanding focus of research in applied linguistics. Early studies reported inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between anxiety and L2 proficiency or performance (Scovel, 1978). These inconsistencies have been attributed largely to methodological limitations, particularly the use of general anxiety measures such as trait anxiety and test anxiety scales. Such instruments fail to capture learners' affective responses that are specific to the L2 learning context (Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999).

In response, researchers reconceptualized second or foreign language anxiety as a distinct, situation-specific construct. This theoretical shift led to the development of specialized instruments designed to assess anxiety within L2 learning environments, including Gardner's (1985) French Class Anxiety Scale and French Use Anxiety Scale, as well as Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The adoption of these L2-specific measures has substantially advanced understanding of the relationship between anxiety and second language learning.

Empirical studies using these instruments consistently report a negative relationship between L2 anxiety and multiple dimensions of language learning. Elevated anxiety levels have been associated with negative attitudes toward L2 learning (Phillips, 1992), lower self-assessments of proficiency (MacIntyre et al., 1997), impaired language processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, 1994b; Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986), and

reduced academic achievement in L2 contexts (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, 1986; Saito & Samimy, 1996). While these findings highlight the pervasive impact of anxiety across language skills, the present study focuses specifically on anxiety related to L2 writing.

Research on writing anxiety as a distinct component of second language learning has been well documented. Previous studies demonstrate that writing anxiety adversely affects both the quality and quantity of learners' written output. Daly (1978) found that highly anxious writers produce compositions of lower quality, characterized by shorter length and simpler syntactic structures. Using writing quality and quantity measures, Hassan (2001) similarly reported that students with lower levels of anxiety produced significantly higher-quality compositions than their more anxious counterparts. Cheng (2002) further observed that learners with high writing anxiety tend to avoid writing-intensive courses and select academic majors that place fewer demands on writing.

To systematically examine L2 writing anxiety, Cheng (2004) developed the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), which measures physiological, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of anxiety related to writing. The SLWAI has since been widely employed in studies involving EFL learners. However, despite its extensive use, research examining L2 writing anxiety among Japanese nursing students remains notably absent.

Recent research has approached second language writing anxiety as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by learners' perceptions of their competence, their actual writing proficiency, and their previous writing experiences. In particular, perceived writing competence may be more closely associated with L2 writing anxiety than objectively measured writing achievement (Mat Daud et al., 2004). This distinction is important because learners who underestimate their abilities may experience substantial anxiety even when their actual performance is satisfactory. Moreover, the finding that L2 writing anxiety is distinguishable from first-language writing anxiety suggests that it is not simply a general fear of writing. Instead, it may arise from challenges specific to writing in another language, including limited linguistic resources, unfamiliar rhetorical expectations, and concerns about evaluation.

Proficiency nevertheless appears to play an important role. Research guided by the deficit hypothesis has suggested that writing anxiety may develop partly as a consequence of insufficient writing skills, with less proficient learners generally reporting greater anxiety than their more proficient peers (Mat Daud et al., 2004). From this perspective, anxiety is not necessarily the original cause of poor writing performance; it may also be a response to learners' awareness of gaps in their vocabulary, grammar, organization, or writing techniques. Anxiety and performance may therefore have a reciprocal relationship: weaknesses in writing ability can produce anxiety, while anxiety may subsequently interfere with concentration, engagement, and performance.

Studies examining the subtypes and perceived causes of L2 writing anxiety provide further insight into this relationship. For example, research involving Indonesian university students identified cognitive anxiety as the most commonly experienced subtype among both first- and second-year students (Kusumaningputri et al., 2018). Cognitive anxiety includes negative expectations, fear of evaluation, and persistent concern about performing poorly. The principal reported causes included language difficulties, insufficient writing practice, limited knowledge of writing techniques, and time pressure. Although the relative importance of these factors differed slightly by year of study, the results indicate that writing anxiety is influenced by both linguistic limitations and the conditions under which writing is taught and assessed.

Some learner characteristics may also influence anxiety. Female students have been found to report significantly higher L2 writing anxiety than male students in at least one university sample, though differences according to year of study were not statistically significant (Cheng, 2002). Such findings should be interpreted cautiously because gender effects may vary according to educational and cultural context. More broadly, the absence of significant differences between year groups suggests that additional time spent studying a language does not necessarily reduce writing anxiety. Without sufficient writing practice, constructive feedback, and opportunities to develop confidence, anxiety may persist or even increase as learners encounter more demanding academic writing tasks.

Taken together, this research suggests that effective writing instruction should address both writing competence and learners' perceptions of that competence. Explicit instruction in linguistic resources and writing techniques, scaffolded practice, manageable writing conditions, and supportive feedback may help students develop more accurate and positive perceptions of their abilities. However, most existing research has examined general university EFL populations, and comparatively little is known about L2 writing anxiety among nursing students. This is an important omission because nursing students may need to write in English for academic study, professional communication, and engagement with international healthcare literature while completing an already demanding specialist curriculum. The present study therefore examines the levels and subtypes of L2 writing anxiety among Japanese nursing students, extending the literature to an under-investigated disciplinary and educational context.

More recent longitudinal research involving Japanese university students indicates that the different dimensions of L2 writing anxiety may not develop uniformly over time. In a nine-month study of 102 first-year students, cognitive anxiety decreased across all proficiency groups, while somatic anxiety decreased among students with higher English proficiency (Oi, 2003). Avoidance behavior, however, did not decline significantly. These findings suggest that writing instruction and increased experience may reduce negative thoughts and physiological reactions without necessarily overcoming students' tendency to avoid writing. The differences observed among proficiency groups also reinforce the importance of considering learners' English ability and perceptions of academic writing when examining writing anxiety.

In a previous study, O'Shea and Williams (2025) investigated L2 writing anxiety among 111 Japanese medical students using the SLWAI. They found that 83.8% of participants experienced high anxiety, 14.4% experienced moderate anxiety, and 1.8% experienced low anxiety. Cognitive anxiety was the most prominent subtype, followed by avoidance behavior and somatic anxiety. These findings demonstrated the prevalence of L2 writing anxiety among Japanese medical students but also raised the question of whether a similar pattern would be observed among students in other healthcare disciplines. The present study builds on this earlier research by applying the same conceptual framework and instrument to Japanese nursing students.

From a psychological perspective, anxiety is commonly classified into three categories: trait anxiety, which reflects a stable personality disposition; state anxiety, which arises in response to specific situations; and situation-specific anxiety, which recurs in particular contexts. Language anxiety is generally conceptualized as a form of situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz, 2001). Building on this framework, Cheng (2004) proposed a three-dimensional model of writing anxiety consisting of somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and avoidance behavior. These dimensions represent the physiological, cognitive, and

behavioral effects of anxiety on the writing process. Cheng argues that the negative relationship between test anxiety and L2 writing performance is primarily driven by cognitive anxiety rather than somatic symptoms or avoidance behavior. Accordingly, this three-dimensional framework is adopted in the present study to identify and analyze types of writing anxiety among EFL learners.

Writing anxiety is particularly relevant to nursing education, although research involving undergraduate nursing students remains limited. Mitchell et al. (2017) examined first-year baccalaureate nursing students enrolled in a discipline-specific scholarly writing course and found that instructional scaffolding could help reduce writing anxiety. This finding highlights the potential value of explicit guidance, staged writing activities, and discipline-relevant instruction. However, the study examined scholarly writing generally rather than writing specifically in an L2. Nursing students are an important population because, although they resemble medical students in being non-English majors preparing for healthcare careers, their educational experiences, professional roles, and communication needs differ. Nurses may use English when completing patient documentation and case reports, reading research articles, working in international clinical environments, and communicating with patients and other healthcare professionals. English writing anxiety may therefore affect both academic learning and students' willingness to engage in professionally relevant written communication. Nevertheless, nursing students remain underrepresented in research on L2 writing anxiety, particularly in Japan. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the levels of L2 writing anxiety and the prevalence of cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior among Japanese nursing students.

Accordingly, the present study extends O'Shea and Williams's (2025) investigation of Japanese medical students by examining overall levels and subtypes of L2 writing anxiety among Japanese nursing students. In addition to addressing an under-researched healthcare cohort, the study considers whether the pattern previously identified among medical students is also evident in nursing education.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the levels of foreign language writing anxiety among Japanese nursing students?
2. What types of foreign language writing anxiety are experienced by Japanese nursing students?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate levels and types of L2 writing anxiety among Japanese nursing students. A quantitative approach was adopted to enable the systematic measurement and statistical analysis of anxiety using a standardized instrument. The cross-sectional design allowed for the collection of data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of participants' anxiety levels prior to formal instruction in the course.

Survey methodology was selected as it is well suited to examining affective variables such as anxiety across a group of learners in a structured and efficient manner. Data were collected using a self-report questionnaire, specifically the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), which has been widely used in previous research on L2 writing anxiety. This design facilitated the identification of overall anxiety levels as well as differences across the three dimensions of writing anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior.

Participants

A total of 34 second-year Japanese nursing students participated in this study. The participants were enrolled in a compulsory English course at a nursing college during the 2025 academic year and were approximately 19–21 years old. The sample consisted primarily of women, reflecting the gender distribution commonly found in nursing programs in Japan.

The participants were non-English majors enrolled in a general English course designed for healthcare-related communication. No standardized proficiency scores were collected as part of the study; consequently, their proficiency levels were not formally established.

Sampling Method

A convenience sampling method was employed in this study. All students enrolled in the target course were invited to participate, and the final sample consisted of those who voluntarily completed the questionnaire. As the participants were drawn from a single intact class, the sample may not be fully representative of the broader population of Japanese nursing students. However, this approach is consistent with previous classroom-based research in applied linguistics and allows for practical access to a defined learner group.

Instrument

To assess students' second language writing anxiety, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was administered in accordance with the host institution's ethical guidelines. Developed by Cheng (2004), the SLWAI is a 22-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure anxiety experienced during second language writing tasks. The English version of the instrument has been extensively validated, demonstrating strong reliability and construct validity through correlational and factor -analytic procedures, with a reported Cronbach's alpha of .89 (Cheng, 2004). The complete SLWAI is shown in the Appendix.

The instrument conceptualizes anxiety across three dimensions. The Somatic Anxiety subscale comprises seven items (Items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, and 19), the Avoidance Behavior subscale comprises seven items (Items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, and 22), and the Cognitive Anxiety subscale comprises eight items (Items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, and 21). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures. Responses from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) were first coded and entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. Negatively worded items (Items 1, 4, 7, 17, 18, 21, and 22) were reverse-scored prior to calculating total and subscale scores, in accordance with the scoring guidelines provided by Cheng (2004).

For each participant, an overall writing anxiety score was computed by summing responses across all 22 items. In addition, subscale scores were calculated for the three dimensions of anxiety: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and score ranges, were calculated for both the overall scale and each subscale.

To interpret the level of anxiety, mean scores were classified according to the criteria proposed by Zhang (2011), where scores above 65 indicate high anxiety, scores below 50 indicate low anxiety, and scores between 50 and 65 indicate moderate anxiety. Frequency distributions were also calculated to determine the number and proportion of participants falling into each anxiety category (high, moderate, and low).

These analyses enabled the identification of both overall anxiety levels and the relative

prominence of different types of writing anxiety among participants.

Results

Overall Levels of Writing Anxiety

As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants (n = 27) demonstrated high levels of L2 writing anxiety. The remaining participants (n = 7) fell within the moderate anxiety range, while no participants were classified as having low levels of anxiety. These findings indicate that elevated writing anxiety was prevalent across the sample.

Table 1
Distribution of Participants by Level of L2 Writing Anxiety

Anxiety level	n	%
High	27	79.4
Moderate	7	20.6
Low	0	0.0

Types of Writing Anxiety

To examine the second research question, mean scores were calculated for each of the three subcategories of anxiety: cognitive anxiety, avoidance behavior, and somatic anxiety. As presented in Table 2, cognitive anxiety emerged as the most prominent form of anxiety among participants, with a mean score of 82. This was followed by avoidance behavior (*M* = 80), while somatic anxiety recorded the lowest mean score (*M* = 69). Despite these differences, all three subscales fell within the high anxiety range, indicating that participants experienced substantial levels of anxiety across cognitive, behavioral, and physiological dimensions.

Table 2
Mean Scores for the Three Types of L2 Writing Anxiety

Anxiety type	M
Cognitive anxiety	82
Avoidance behavior	80
Somatic anxiety	69

Discussion

Overall Levels of L2 Writing Anxiety

The findings of this study indicate that a substantial majority of participants experienced high levels of L2 writing anxiety, with no students falling into the low-anxiety category. This pattern suggests that writing in English constitutes a significant source of stress for Japanese nursing students. The prevalence of high anxiety levels is consistent with previous research demonstrating that L2 learners, particularly in foreign language contexts, frequently experience elevated anxiety when engaging in productive language skills such as writing.

The prevalence of high anxiety among the nursing students broadly resembles the pattern reported by O'Shea and Williams (2025) among Japanese medical students. In the earlier study, 83.8% of medical students were classified as experiencing high writing anxiety, compared with 79.4% of nursing students in the present study. Moderate anxiety was reported by 14.4% of the medical cohort and 20.6% of the nursing cohort, whereas low anxiety was uncommon in the medical cohort (1.8%) and absent from the nursing cohort. Thus, approximately four out of five students in both studies experienced high L2 writing anxiety.

Table 3
Comparison of Writing Anxiety Levels in Medical and Nursing Students

Anxiety level	Medical students (n = 111)	Nursing students (n = 34)
High	83.8%	79.4%
Moderate	14.4%	20.6%
Low	1.8%	0.0%

These descriptive similarities suggest that high L2 writing anxiety may not be limited to medical students but may be experienced more broadly by Japanese students in healthcare-related programs. Nevertheless, the differences between the cohorts should not be interpreted as evidence that one group is more anxious than the other. The nursing sample was considerably

smaller, the data were collected in different academic years, and no inferential statistical comparison was conducted.

One possible explanation for these findings relates to learners' level of language proficiency. As noted by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989), anxiety tends to decrease as proficiency increases. The participants in the present study were non-English majors enrolled in compulsory English courses. Although proficiency was not measured using a standardized test, the students were generally judged by their experienced English instructors to be at a lower-intermediate to intermediate level. Limited linguistic resources may therefore contribute to heightened anxiety, as learners may struggle to express ideas accurately and fear making errors.

In addition, contextual factors specific to Japan may play an important role. English education in Japan has traditionally emphasized grammar, reading, and examination performance, often at the expense of productive skills such as writing. As a result, learners may have limited experience with extended writing tasks, which can increase uncertainty and anxiety when such tasks are required. Furthermore, sociocultural factors, including sensitivity to evaluation and concern about negative judgment, may intensify anxiety in academic settings.

Types of Writing Anxiety

The results further revealed that cognitive anxiety was the most prominent subtype of L2 writing anxiety among participants, followed by avoidance behavior and somatic anxiety. This pattern is broadly consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Cheng (2002), who emphasized the central role of cognitive processes in writing anxiety.

The ordering of the three anxiety dimensions was also consistent with the previous medical-student study. In both cohorts, cognitive anxiety was the most prominent subtype, followed by avoidance behavior and somatic anxiety. This consistency suggests that concern about evaluation, negative expectations, and perceived writing performance may be particularly important features of L2 writing anxiety among Japanese healthcare students.

Cognitive anxiety encompasses negative expectations, fear of evaluation, and concerns about performance. The high levels of cognitive anxiety observed in this study suggest that participants are particularly affected by evaluative pressure in writing contexts. This finding aligns with research by Horwitz (2001), which highlights fear of negative evaluation as a core component of foreign language anxiety. Learners who anticipate criticism or failure may experience intrusive thoughts that interfere with concentration and task execution, thereby impairing writing performance.

Avoidance behavior emerged as the second most prevalent type of anxiety. This indicates that a considerable number of students cope with writing-related stress by disengaging from writing tasks or delaying their completion. Such behaviors are problematic in the context of language learning, as writing proficiency develops through sustained practice and feedback. Avoidance may therefore contribute to a negative cycle in which reduced practice leads to lower proficiency, which in turn reinforces anxiety.

Although somatic anxiety was the least prominent subtype, it was nevertheless present at relatively high levels. This suggests that writing anxiety is not solely a cognitive or behavioral phenomenon but also involves physiological responses such as tension and discomfort. The presence of somatic symptoms further underscores the intensity of anxiety experienced by participants and highlights the need for a holistic understanding of L2 writing anxiety.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several important

implications for language teaching, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts such as nursing education. Given the high levels of cognitive anxiety observed, instructors should prioritize strategies that reduce fear of evaluation and create a supportive learning environment. For example, incorporating low-stakes writing activities, formative assessment, and opportunities for revision may help learners develop confidence without the pressure of high-stakes grading.

In addition, process-oriented approaches to writing instruction may be beneficial. By emphasizing drafting, feedback, and revision rather than final products alone, teachers can help students view writing as a developmental process rather than a one-time performance. Peer feedback activities may also reduce anxiety by normalizing errors and fostering collaborative learning.

To address avoidance behavior, it is important to increase students' engagement with writing tasks in a structured and manageable way. Breaking assignments into smaller components and providing clear guidance can make writing tasks feel less overwhelming. Furthermore, integrating discipline-specific writing tasks relevant to nursing—such as case reports or patient documentation—may enhance motivation and perceived relevance.

Finally, given the presence of somatic anxiety, instructors may consider incorporating strategies to help students manage stress, such as brief relaxation techniques or classroom practices that promote a low-anxiety atmosphere. Addressing anxiety from cognitive, behavioral, and physiological perspectives may lead to more effective learning outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample size was relatively small (n = 34) and drawn from a single institution, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples would provide a more comprehensive understanding of L2 writing anxiety among nursing students.

Second, the study relied on self-report data collected using a questionnaire, which may be subject to response bias. Participants' perceptions of their anxiety may not fully reflect their actual experiences in writing tasks. Third, the cross-sectional design captures anxiety at a single point in time and does not account for potential changes over the duration of the course.

Finally, while the questionnaire was provided in both English and Japanese, subtle differences in interpretation may have influenced responses despite efforts to ensure translation accuracy.

Future research could build on the findings of this study by employing longitudinal designs to examine how writing anxiety evolves over time, particularly in response to instructional interventions. Experimental studies investigating the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies for reducing writing anxiety would also be valuable.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a substantial majority of Japanese nursing students experience elevated levels of L2 writing anxiety. Cognitive anxiety was the most prevalent subtype, followed by avoidance behavior and somatic anxiety. When considered alongside O'Shea and Williams's (2025) findings, the present results suggest that elevated L2 writing anxiety, particularly cognitive anxiety, may be common across different groups of Japanese healthcare students. Replication of the same general pattern in a nursing cohort extends the earlier findings beyond medical education, although the small, single-institution sample means that broader generalization requires further research.

Conflict of Interest and Funding

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This research received no external funding.

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Appendix

Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory

1. While writing in English, I am not nervous at all.
英語で書いている間、私はまったく緊張していません。
2. I feel my heart pounding when I write English compositions under time constraints.
限られた時間の中で英作文を書いているとドキドキします。
3. While writing English compositions, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.
英作文を書いていて、評価されるとわかったら不安や心配です。
4. I often choose to write down my thoughts in English.
私は自分の考えを英語で書き留めることをよく選びます。
5. I usually do my best to avoid writing English compositions.
私は通常、英語の作文を書かないように最善を尽くします。
6. My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English composition.
英作文を書き始めると頭が真っ白になることがよくあります。
7. I don't worry that my English compositions are a lot worse than others.
私の英語の作文が他の人よりずっと下手だという心配はありません。
8. I tremble or perspire when I write English compositions under time pressure.
時間のプレッシャーの中で英作文を書くと、震えたり汗をかいたりします。
9. If my English composition is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.
もし私の英語の作文が評価されるなら、私は非常に悪い成績をとることを心配するだろう。
10. I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.
英語で書かなければならない状況を避けるために最善を尽くします。
11. My thoughts become jumbled when I write English compositions under time constraints.
限られた時間の中で英作文を書くと頭が混乱する。
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write compositions.
やむを得ない場合を除き、作文に英語を使用することはありません。
13. I often feel fear when I write English compositions under time constraints.
限られた時間で英作文を書くと、恐怖を感じることがよくあります。
14. I am afraid that the other students would laugh at my English composition if they read it.
他の学生が私の英語の作文を読んだら、笑ってしまうのではないかと心配しています。
15. I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English compositions.
思いがけず英語の作文を書くように頼まれたとき、私はフリーズします。
16. I would do my best to excuse myself if asked to write English compositions.
英語の作文を書くように頼まれたら、できるだけ言い訳します。
17. I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.
自分の英語の作文が他の人にどう思われるか、まったく気にしない。
18. I usually seek every possible chance to write English compositions outside of class.
私は通常、授業以外で英語の作文を書くあらゆる機会を探しています。
19. I usually feel my whole body rigid and tense when I write English compositions.
英作文を書くときは、たいてい全身がこわばり、緊張します。
20. I am afraid of my English composition being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.
クラスでのディスカッションのサンプルとして、私の英語の作文が選ばれるのではないかと心配しています。
21. I am not afraid at all that my English compositions would be rated as very poor.
私の英語の作文が非常に悪いと評価されることをまったく恐れていません。
22. Whenever possible, I would use English to write compositions.
可能な限り英語を使って作文を書いていました。