

# The Mean Examiner: How Language Anxiety Affects Performance during an Exam

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychologists Norman Triplett and Gordon Allport observed that people behave differently when they are in the presence of others. Their findings, however, were contradictory as in some cases the performance of the individuals was increased, while at other times it became worse. This gave birth to the theory of social facilitation, which can also be defined as the notion that people's performance is likely to change when other people are watching them. In his article Zajonc (1965) investigated this phenomenon in the review of studies carried out earlier in the field, and eventually developed his activation theory. This was the first theory attempting to explain why the mere presence of others increases performance sometimes, yet decreases it other times. According to him, the presence of others produces a heightened level of arousal in an individual, which increases the likelihood of doing better on well-learned tasks. However, in the case of complex or unfamiliar tasks, such an increased arousal level decreases performance.

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1. Anxiety and performance

Cottrell (1968) and Henchy and Glass (1968) modified Zajonc's observation suggesting that the source of increased activation in the presence of others was not the mere presence of them, but a feeling of anxiety that we are being judged. This theory, called evaluation apprehension, predicts that when we work surrounded by others, our concern over what they think can enhance or impair our performance. According to these researchers, increased activation only happens when "actors" are afraid of being evaluated. Weiss and Miller (1971) later theorized how activation increases only when the individual perceives negative evaluation.

Zajonc (1980) modified his original theory regarding activation adding that the presence of observers also triggers uncertainty in the actor since they do not know how the other persons will behave. This then causes a state of alertness and this is what increases the level of arousal. Zajonc retained his original idea, in which this heightened arousal level increases performance on simple tasks, but decreases performance of complex tasks.

Guerin (1983) also mentioned uncertainty suggesting that social facilitation effects only occurred when a situation involved uncertainty. In cases when the task or situation is not familiar, when the individual does not know the observer, the uncertainty inherent in such situations increases the arousal level of the individual. Having tested these assumptions, Guerin also observed that such performance differences were only traceable in the case of complex tasks.

## **2.2. Anxiety and foreign language test performance**

While participating in an oral language exam, candidates are being watched and evaluated by examiner(s). On the basis of the theories described above, there is reason to believe that the presence and behaviour of the examiners may have a strong impact on the performance of the test takers. We may also assume that, as candidates perform a complex task, that is, speaking in a foreign language, the presence of examiners may have a *negative* effect on their performance.

Regarding the effects the various factors impact upon second language test performance, Bachman (1990) suggested a coherent framework consisting of four factors: (a) communicative language ability, (2) the test taker's personal characteristics, (3) test method factors, and (4) random factors. Within the scope of our research, we are primarily interested in the second set of factors, personal characteristics, which includes the personal attributes of the test taker that potentially affect their test performance. The attributes, which differ throughout each test taker, include their (1) demographic background (e.g., age, gender, socio-economic status and educational background), (2) cognitive characteristics (e.g., aptitude and learning strategies), (3) personality features (self-esteem, anxiety and risk-taking), and (4) socio-psychological features (e.g., attitudes and motivation). Several years following the development of the above framework, Bachman and Palmer (1996) described four sets of individual characteristics affecting test performance: (1) personal characteristics (age, gender, etc.), (2) topical knowledge, (3) affective schemata, and (4) language ability. According to the authors, personal characteristics include "individual attributes that are not part of test takers' language ability but which still may influence performance on language tests" (p. 112). The affective responses of the test takers to the characteristics of the test environment or tasks may also increase or decrease test performance. Test takers' familiarity with the circumstances, under which an exam takes place, may also influence their affective responses to the test task. Anxiety, it seems, is one of the factors which has an effect on foreign language test performance.

Too much anxiety about a test is generally referred to as test anxiety, or test apprehension (Zeidner, 1998). In other words, test anxiety is defined as the tendency to worry about one's own performance (e.g., expectations of failure) and aptitude (e.g., self-deprecatory thoughts) under evaluative or test conditions (Calvo & Carreiras, 1993). Zeidner and Calvo & Carreiras found that anxiety might restrain test takers' ability to retain and recall information. Test anxiety has been defined as an element of general anxiety, including cognitive attentional processes, which interfere with competent performance in academic or testing situations (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). Anxiety produces a "noise" or interference within our brain and this hinders our ability to retain and recall what we have stored in our memory and also has a negative influence on our ability to comprehend and reason. Sarason (1984) connects test anxiety to the cognitive thought processes that the learner goes through while undergoing a test. Although some degree of arousal is necessary for optimal performance, when the

intensity is too high, we begin to feel nervous and experience anxiety. At this level, anxiety becomes distracting causing our performance to decline. Test anxiety may also be generated when test takers, who have performed poorly in the past, form negative or irrelevant thoughts during an evaluative situation. According to Shi (2012) a diabolic circle may be set in motion as the fear of negative evaluation generates anxiety, which affects performance, and poor performance, in turn, decreases confidence and self-efficacy.

When looking at the connection between anxiety and the various language skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening), it appears that speaking in a foreign language produces a high level of anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). The reason behind this phenomenon implies that language learners may not be able to express themselves clearly, which then leads to a decrease in their confidence and an increased level of anxiety. According to Horwitz et al. (1986) there is “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (p. 127). Phillips (1992) carried out a study, involving 44 French students, to determine what influence anxiety has on students’ performance during an oral test. The findings of her study indicated moderately negative correlations between anxiety and performance. She emphasized that language anxiety has a definite influence on performance, however, it is difficult to determine its extent. Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that anxiety soars to the highest levels when test takers communicate orally during an oral test, which has the potential in provoking both test and oral communication anxiety, simultaneously. Han & Li (2005) propose that oral English test anxiety is related to such elements as test anxiety, communicative apprehension and face anxiety (i.e., the fear of the direct threat to one’s self-esteem).

The thorough investigation in the causes of oral test anxiety reveals that factors such as testing techniques, test format, time available, testing environment and clarity of test instructions may all generate test anxiety to a certain extent (Young, 1991). Kessler’s study (2010) investigated the characteristics of fluency in students’ audio journals recorded in a laboratory setting using mobile audio devices. The frequency of their preferred recording environment was observed and raters analyzed the students’ volume, pausing and utterance length in order to determine, whether anxiety had an influence on their fluency and whether the data gained can be connected to the two different environments. Kessler pointed out that the influence of affective factors in a language classroom is obvious. He suggested that this influence was produced through the risk of embarrassment or humiliation the student may face when speaking a foreign language.

Finally, it must be noted that within our competitive society, language tests have become a vital tool for making important decisions (granting entrance to higher education, employment, etc.). Consequently, their stake has increased which, in turn, may increase the level of anxiety candidates feel being administered a language exam.

### **2.3. Features of the Hungarian classroom**

The Hungarian education system has undergone many changes in the past 25 years. However, the influence of the old-fashioned, “Prussian” model, which became the norm in Hungary in 1869 when the first education law was drafted, can still be felt in the everyday practice of public education. This model emphasizes factual learning and discipline. The research of Antalné Szabó Ágnes (2006) on teacher talk supports this premise. In analyzing the communication of video-recorded lessons, she discovered

that 94% of the time it was the teacher who initiated communication, constantly reinforcing herself as the primary source of knowledge. On average, students initiated communication only 6% of the time. Regarding the ongoing oral interactions, teachers talked 78% of the time. These patterns confirm the hierarchical nature of the Hungarian classroom, in which it is the teacher who dominates and determines the flow of communication.

Speaking in a foreign language produces a high level of anxiety in itself (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) and a situation, characterized by strong hierarchy, may further increase the general anxiety level of students. The observation study of Nikolov (1999) investigated the general teaching conditions in English lessons in secondary schools. She also found that most of the classes were teacher-fronted, that monotony and boredom characterized the lessons in which the most frequent activity was answering questions. When asked to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, "... a few teachers simply left the questions unanswered and most often they tended to identify more weaknesses than strengths" (p. 230). Many of the teachers complained about their students' aptitude, lack of motivation and willingness to communicate adding that they "(...) did not put enough effort and interest into language studies," (p. 231). We have seen in Kessler's study that the influence of affective factors in a language classroom is obvious and that this influence is produced through the risk of embarrassment or humiliation the student may face, when they speak in the foreign language. Once teachers develop a rather negative opinion on their students, chances are greater that they might be embarrassed and/or humiliated. Teachers' expectations are crucial, as they often work as self-fulfilling prophecies exerting a strong influence upon the self-image and motivation of students (Csapó, 1998; Józsa & Fejes, 2010; Szenczi, 2008). Investigating the potential existence of various emotions related to classroom atmosphere, Imre (2002) and Oláh (1999, 2005) discovered that according to Hungarian students, only 32% of their school activities create joy, occupy their attention and challenge their abilities. Most of the boredom, apathy and anxiety students experience in their life is directly connected to school. In her questionnaire study Imre (2002) found that when classes are not interesting to students, they tend to become less motivated which, in turn, makes teachers resort to disciplinary measures more frequently.

### **3. The present study**

#### **3.1. Participants and socio-educational context**

In summarizing the results of the studies carried out in the Hungarian context, the following may be stated: (1) there is a strong hierarchy in the lessons in which teachers portray a dominant role (Antalné, 2006); (2) most classes are held in a teacher-fronted way and (3) teachers typically possess a low opinion of their students (Nikolov, 1999); (4) two-thirds of the feelings students have towards school is negative (boredom, apathy and anxiety); (5) in most cases, students do not find school/lessons interesting; (6) in such classes teachers more frequently resort to using disciplinary measures (Imre, 2002 and Oláh, 1999 and 2005). Consequently, the Hungarian language classroom appears to be a place exhibiting several contextual factors (1), (2), (3) and (6) that all have the potential to develop anxiety in students.

At the same time, however, possessing a language certificate has high value throughout Hungary. Entrance into Hungarian public higher education institutions is

granted on a credit basis and applicants who possess a language certificate receive extra credits. From 2020, only those students may enter higher education who have earned a language certificate. This implies that taking a language exam can be regarded as a high stakes situation. Typically, it is secondary school students who submit to language exams. There are several language examination systems throughout the country, and one of the leading ones is ECL Examinations. The ECL Consortium (European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages) is an association of institutions providing unified, reliable and valid standards for the assessment of attained language knowledge. ECL exams test oral and written ability to effectively communicate through the use of the language of everyday discourse on practical, professional and personal topics at varying degrees of complexity. The ECL oral exam has a paired format; the examinees are required to converse with one another, in the form of an intelligent and meaningful discussion.

Our study included four participants: two pairs of examinees at two different levels of language knowledge. One of the pairs, two secondary school students (hereinafter referred to as teenage boy and girl), participated in the oral exam on level B2, while the other pair, two university students (hereinafter referred to as male and female university students) participated on level C1. Both pairs included a male and a female participant to determine whether gender is important regarding the focus of our study. We involved two secondary school students, since it is typically this age group who actively pursue language exams at level B2. The proportion of university students already possessing a language certificate is higher, which explains why we had one participant with and another one without a language certificate, in the case of the level C1 participants. The other reason for having at least one participant with a language certificate ensures that in this particular case, we had the chance to observe whether his previous exam experience had any influence on his performance.

When candidates subject themselves to an oral language exam, they are being watched and evaluated by examiner(s). Furthermore, in the case of a paired language exam, there is another person, the other candidate. On the basis of the theories mentioned above, we have reason to suggest that the (mere) presence of others may affect the performance of the test takers. Since the candidates perform a complex task, speaking in a foreign language, the presence and behaviour of the examiners may have a detrimental effect on their performance. Additionally, if the examiner behaves in a way which is conducive towards generating anxiety, we may also assume that this can and will enhance these negative effects. On the basis of the literature reviewed above, test takers' level of anxiety may be increased if they feel embarrassed and/or humiliated, if their self-confidence is undermined and if they feel the situation implies a direct threat to their self-esteem. Such feelings may be generated if the examiner (1) gives open and negative evaluation (especially in front of other people); (2) corrects the mistake test takers make; (3) displays an unpredictable behaviour.

The aim of our small-scale qualitative study was to determine whether anxiety, generated under experimental conditions, in the form of mock oral exams, has visible and measurable influence on the performance of the participants taking an oral language exam in English. Consequently, our research questions were as follows:

- Does the anxiety generating behaviour of the examiner (correcting the mistakes of the participants, making derogatory comments and taking notes in front of them) have an influence on the performance of the candidates?
- In what way does the behaviour of the examiner affect the performance of candidates?

### 3.2. Procedure

The ECL oral language exam consists of three parts. The first part includes an introduction, which prepares and warms the candidates up prior to the actual exam. The second part of the exam is a guided conversation in which the examiner determines a certain topic and provides the candidates with some guided questions so they can develop an intelligent discussion with respect to the topic. The third part includes a monologue in which the candidates are asked to speak individually about a topic represented by images and pictures. The participants of our study were asked to take part in three ECL mock oral exams. All exams were recorded on videotape. Immediately following the oral exams, the participants were asked to take a listening comprehension test, including two ten-item tasks. During the first two exams, the examiner exhibited neutral behaviour towards the participants. However, during the third mock exam, he consistently corrected the mistakes of the test takers, took notes while they were speaking and spoke to them in a derogatory way. We hypothesized, that although these mock exams are not regarded as high-stakes situations, the changed behaviour of the examiner would nevertheless exert an influence on the performance of the test takers. Following the third mock oral exam, a semi-structured interview was conducted and recorded with the participants. They were asked two questions:

- 1) What difference did you notice in the behaviour of the examiner during the third session?
- 2) How did his changed behaviour affect you?

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Quantitative results

Let us take a look at the results of the three listening comprehension tests (see Table 1). Two participants achieved a lower score following the third oral exam, while the two other participants' score did not change compared to their second test.

Table 1. Results of the listening comprehension tests on levels B2 and C1

Participant	Score on Test 1	Score on Test 2	Score on Test 3
<b>Level C1</b>			
Male university student	90%	100%	80%
Female university student	80%	60%	60%
<b>Level B2</b>			
Teenage boy	80%	70%	70%
Teenage girl	80%	80%	70%

Since the sessions were recorded, we counted the number of grammatical errors the candidates made during the mock oral exams (Table 2). We decided to disregard the mistakes connected to phonology and pronunciation and focus purely on grammatical errors.

Table 2. Number of grammatical errors made during the mock oral exams

Participant	No. of errors made at exam 1	No. of errors made at exam 2	No. of errors made at exam 3
<b>Level C1</b>			
<i>Male university student</i>	9	9	14
<i>Female university student</i>	14	14	14
<b>Level B2</b>			
<i>Teenage boy</i>	6	5	8
<i>Teenage girl</i>	8	5	18

The number of errors made increased in the case of three of the participants, while with respect to one participant (female university student), it remained at the same (relatively high) level. These results seem to confirm our prior expectation that the behaviour of the examiner can have an influence on the participants' performance.

#### 4.2. Qualitative results

Following the third session, a retrospective interview was conducted with the participants. The aim of the interview was for the participants to recall how they reacted to the changed behaviour of the examiner. Each participant acknowledged that the changed behaviour of the examiner indeed had an influence upon them, despite the fact that these exams had no stake. The two university students described that their level of anxiety and frustration had been increased when the examiner became overly personal, when he corrected their grammatical errors, when he made a derogatory comment (e.g. "you should know this") and when he took notes.

The female university student admitted that being too personal had an emotional effect upon her, as most people do not like discussing private issues in front of strangers. She also remarked that the derogatory comments made by the examiner had produced "bad feelings" in her, adding: "...in a real exam situation it would undoubtedly generate frustration in me, because I am not that confident in my overall knowledge."

Regarding the constant correction of grammatical errors and note taking, the male university student explained, "... this time, when my errors are highlighted, my brain begins to solve the problems I made in the past (sic) so I am unable to think of what I want to say because I am constantly thinking about how not to make another error as it will be corrected... and I start to focus on my pronunciation and it is not the natural pronunciation that I produce... I begin to mispronounce even those words I was sure of."

The female university student recounted the same experience and illustrated it with a concrete example. She mentioned that the examiner's constant error correcting behaviour made her focus too much on the words she was saying, and as a result she managed to confuse *medium* and *media*, however she had known the difference between the two words. "... under normal or calm circumstances I am aware of the different meanings, I know this, but this time, it turned out to be the opposite."

Regarding the same issue, the male university student added that he had had the same experience in a former language exam situation: "... when I made an error, I knew I made it because the pen started moving and afterwards, I said 'Oh my God', I made an error, but what was it?" He explained how this haunting memory from his past was revived in his mind producing the same feeling as back then.

The two teenagers had different views on the effects of the examiner's behaviour. The boy stated that this changed behaviour had no effect on him, while the girl acknowledged that she had felt anxiety and anger and, as a result, grew distant and reserved.

At the beginning, both mentioned that the error correcting and note taking activities made the exam more personal, because "... in school, our errors are always corrected," suggesting that they were used to this situation. The teenage girl admitted, it was the note taking that had made her anxiety level increase. She said: "I tried not to look at the paper, where my errors were listed, I felt their number was just growing and growing."

We also asked the teenage boy about his reaction to the note taking of the examiner. He responded, "... if it had been a high stakes situation... it would have been more unpleasant...". Elaborating on what she felt due to the note taking, the teenage girl added, "... by the end, it started to annoy me... I became more reserved so as not to make another mistake." "I thought I would not do well. Perhaps if I had not seen the paper it would have been better, but it was almost in my face." She also added, "I let him (the teenage boy) do the talking, and in the meantime I quickly summarized what I wanted to say, so I would not make an error which then would be corrected. By the end I tried to simplify what I said so as no one would find faults with my statements."

When asked what and how they thought about their mistakes being consistently corrected and notes being taken, the teenage boy said, he had not been bothered by the note taking since, as he put it, "actually we can expect an examiner to be condescending." When asked why, he added "I don't know, if someone already works as an examiner I think it's not that big of a problem if he is a bit disrespectful, and anyway, we are, to a certain extent, used to such a situation..." To the question whether he considered himself self-confident, the teenage boy replied, „If I am adequately prepared for the exam, then perhaps, yes, but if I am not well prepared, then not at all."

## **5. Discussion**

Considering what the participants mentioned in the interviews, the role of individual differences is obvious. The results of our small scale study confirm the results of researchers who found that factors such as the testing techniques and the testing environment, including the behaviour of the examiner, may generate test anxiety to a certain extent (Han & Li, 2002; Kessler, 2010; Sarason, 1984; Shi, 2012; Young, 1991).

The interviews corroborated the theory of evaluation apprehension, that we tend to become anxious when being judged (Cottrell, 1968; Henchy and Glass, 1968), and the role of uncertainty in generating social facilitation effects. Three out of four participants mentioned that the concern over what the examiner thought affected them. Reflecting upon the error correcting and note taking activities, they remarked that these had annoyed them and made them focus on trying not to make another mistake, which, in turn, diverted their attention from what they really wanted to say. The female university student admitted that her feelings had restrained her ability to retain and recall information adding, that under normal circumstances, she would

have been able to activate her existing knowledge regarding those particular English vocabulary items (*media* and *medium*), in contrast to what actually happened. This is a concrete example for the findings of Zeidner and Calvo & Carreiras that anxiety might hinder test takers' ability to retain and recall information (Calvo & Carreiras, 1993; Zeidner, 1998).

Speaking in a foreign language seems to produce a high level of anxiety because language learners may not be able to express themselves clearly, and it may decrease their confidence and increase their level of anxiety. During an oral exam anxiety may become even more intensive, as in this case both test and oral communication anxiety may become activated simultaneously (Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). One way to cope with such unpleasant feelings was visible in the case of the teenage girl participant, who described how she had tried not to look at the notes being taken, grew more reserved, let her partner talk and simplified what she wanted to say. This led her to say less than what she had intended to, so the quality of her oral performance was reduced. As in an oral exam situation it is the oral communication of the candidates which is assessed, we can reason that such a strategy may lead to a lower number of points awarded for the performance.

The male university student displayed a specific example of the phenomenon, described by Sarason (1984), in which test anxiety may increase when test takers who have performed poorly in the past form negative or irrelevant thoughts during an evaluative situation. He said that he had already had such an experience in the past, and this event was recalled in his mind as a result of the examiner's attitude. We can also see examples for how the diabolic circle, mentioned by Shi (2012), works: the fear of negative evaluation generates anxiety, which affects performance, and poor performance, in turn, decreases confidence and self-efficacy. In both test taker pairs, the female candidates referred to this: "in a real exam situation, it must have generated frustration, because I am not that confident in my overall knowledge" (female university student) and "... by the end it (the note taking) started to annoy me... I became more distant and reserved so as not to make another mistake..." (teenage girl).

The teenage participants' comments shed light on the current realities of the Hungarian classroom. They illustrate how the error-correcting and note-taking activities of the examiner made the exam 'more personal', because "... in school our errors are always corrected," suggesting that they are used to this situation. This explanation is in accordance with the findings of Nikolov (1999), that the most frequently used oral activity in an English lesson in Hungary is answering questions in a lockstep fashion, always following the IRF cycle: initiation by the teacher (I), reply by the student (R), and feedback (F), in the form of corrections, by the teacher. The same study (Nikolov, 1999) demonstrated that teachers did not have a high opinion on their students and complained about their aptitude and lack of motivation. The teenage boy remarked that test takers may actually "expect the examiner to be condescending," adding, "...it's not that big of a problem if he is a bit disrespectful". These comments may refer to the fact that students are indeed used to being looked down on and to being expected to perform lower than their actual aptitude would position them.

## 6. Conclusion

Our small-scale qualitative empirical study aimed at revealing whether the examiner's behaviour, having the potential to generate anxiety (correcting mistakes, making derogatory comments and taking notes), has any influence on the performance of the

participants. There were three videotaped mock oral exams, followed immediately by a listening comprehension test. On the first two occasions the examiner demonstrated neutral behaviour towards the participants, while on the third occasion he consistently corrected their mistakes, took notes and talked to them in a derogatory way. The results of the listening comprehension tests showed that two participants achieved a lower score following the third oral exam, while the two other participants' score did not change when compared to their second test. Regarding the oral exam, it was found that the number of grammatical errors made increased in the case of three participants.

We wished to determine how the examiner's behaviour affected the performance of the participants in the retrospective interviews recorded following the third mock exam. Three of the four candidates mentioned concrete examples, admitting that their level of anxiety and frustration had increased when the examiner (1) was too personal, when he (2) corrected their grammatical errors, when he (3) made derogatory comments (e.g. "you should know this") and when he (4) took notes. The concrete comments on the examiner's behaviour illustrate the inverse relationship existing between evaluation apprehension and poorer performance on complex tasks, such as taking an oral language test. It was also visible that error correction has the potential to make a participant feel embarrassed. Under such circumstances, they may feel that their self-esteem and self-confidence is threatened and/or questioned, which may divert their attention away from the task. The same may be stated regarding derogatory comments. The teenage participants' answers reflected the practices being carried out in many English language classes in Hungarian public schools (teachers' constant error correction) and illustrated how students are indeed used to being disdained.

## 7. References

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