# THE ACQUISITION OF TRANSACTIONAL COMPETENCE IN WRITING: A CASE STUDY

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background information regarding the reasons for the present study and the subjects of the empirical investigation[1]

The motivation for the present study was the hundreds of letters written every year by students to lecturers at the Further Training Campus of Vista University. The sole purpose of this campus is to provide in-service training for teachers in the Department of Education and Training. This means that students study by means of correspondence to upgrade their qualifications, while they are full-time teachers.

Courses at the Further Training Campus are taught by means of study manuals, tutorial letters and the submission and marking of assignments. The duration of any one of the various courses is two years: in the first year students do a compulsory education course plus first-year courses in two school subjects. In the second year advanced courses are followed in the same school subjects plus a course each in the methodology of teaching these two subjects. Assignments have to be handed in at specific dates indicated in a first tutorial letter. It is expected of students that they will notify course supervisors (lecturers responsible for a specific course) if they are not able to submit assignments in time, either by telephoning or by writing a letter.

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Most students choose to contact their lecturers by means of letters to request the extension of dates on which assignments are due. These letters of request, of which the following is an example, aroused the curiosity of the current researcher:

Sir/ Madam

LATE SUBMISSION OF ASSIGNMENT NO 1

I herein inform you that I received my manuals late on the fifth of March. So there was nothing I could do. Secondly around our place there's no one who is doing English second year. I should have made some arrangements.

Please sir I plea and beg you to consider my assignment.

Your attention is highly appreciated.

Yours faithfully
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It seems as if this student has very few problems with the grammar of English, but certain phrases catch the eye immediately: "I herein inform you...", "I plea and beg you..." and "Your attention is highly appreciated".

Lecturers in the Department of English are bewildered by what is generally called the "tone" or "politeness level" of student letters, and the present study was motivated by this bewilderment. The main aim was the description and analysis of the levels of politeness,

specifically as realized in the requests, in letters written by mainly Zulu, Tswana and Northern Sotho students.

The student who wrote the above letter was following a second-year course in the Department of English to obtain the Senior Education Certificate (SEC), which would enable him/her to teach English (and another school subject) up to standard 8 level. Students are expected to reach a certain level of competence in English which includes both language skills and knowledge of language and literature.

## 1.2 Necessity of study

In a country where social prejudice was institutionalized until a short time ago, and human relations are still unstable, the apparent flouting of politeness conventions could lead to miscommunication between speaker/writer and hearer/reader. At best, inadvertent obsequiousness or rudeness could be ignored, but at its worst, it could create more prejudice. Kasper (1990:193) warns against this danger for second-language speakers and indicates the "risk of inadvertently violating politeness norms, thereby forfeiting their claims to being treated as *social* equals" (emphasis added).

The necessity for the study lies, therefore, on two levels. In the first place it increases the body of knowledge on the development of politeness conventions in the production of written communication in a second-language, as called for by Cumming and Schulze[2], and secondly it provides information for the assessment of student politeness competence within a set of conventions identified by either language course developers or professional peers.

## 1.3 Data collection

The data was collected by analyzing student letters of request, supported by a questionnaire to the students and a tolerance test by English first-language speakers and other possible

recipients of these particular student letters. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information in three areas: the personal and professional background of the subjects, their language background and finally, their comprehension of politeness conventions in various utterances. Two types of letters were analyzed. Firstly, as part of an assignment, students were set the task of writing a letter to their course supervisor asking for extension of the date on which an assignment was due. This formed the bulk of the material used for performance analyses. A further analysis was done of letters sent to the University on the students' own initiative and these were compared to the assignment letters. The results of these analyses were then correlated with the information obtained in the questionnaire. A last step was to test the tolerance of first-language speakers and other possible recipients of letters (referred to below as the 'evaluation panel') as to the 'tone' or tenor (see 1.4 below) in the letters. The results influenced to some extent the processing of data obtained from the questionnaire and the letters.

## 1.4 Clarification of terms: transactional competence

The term *transactional* competence is used to describe the type of writing expected in student letters of request, in the sense intended by Weidemann (1986:13) when he defines it as "the ability not only to use language functions correctly, but to know that there are *strategic* considerations and criteria which apply to determine the appropriate grammatical realizations of these functions".

The main reason for the preference of the term *transactional competence* is concerned with the fact that written communication is the focal point of this study. In the field of writing, 'transactional' writing has been seen as the use of written language "to accomplish the more pragmatic, everyday business of the world, often consisting of exchanging information or performing various speech acts: requesting, inviting, ordering, etc." (Beach and Bridwell 1984:185).

For the purposes of this study, *tenor* is that element of transactional competence which constitutes the focal point of the performance analyses discussed below. Tenor is that element which influences the choice of appropriate language "particularly in respect of the *degree* of FORMALITY" (Wales 1989:457). The argument is that tenor is concerned with the relationship of participants relative to one another[3]; that is, the degree to which participants see each other as having equal or different statuses within a particular situation. When requests are made by a second language speaker in a way perceived to be inappropriate by a first language speaker, communication is deemed to have failed *pragmatically*, and the term *pragmatic failure* is used instead of 'error'.

The realization of tenor in a second language is probably particularly sensitive to transfer of first language conventions of politeness. When this realization is, moreover, dependent upon the knowledge of particularly difficult or complex grammatical structures, the learner's task becomes increasingly problematical.

## 2  Analysis and description of pragmatic failure

In an effort to determine the 'level of politeness' and/ or 'pragmatic failure' in student letters, and particularly as regards the realization of requests, it was decided to analyze the letter as a whole, and not to extract, for example, only the request. Since an initial analysis indicated that students switched from one level of formality to another, used more than one request, included other speech acts such as promises (which affected the level of formality) and addressed the reader directly in the body of the letter, a format was devised which attempted to account for all aspects of the letter, including aspects of grammar. One of the hypotheses underlying this study is that the grammatical complexity of the English auxiliary system creates problems with the formulation of requests, and therefore particular attention was paid to the use of auxiliaries both in the request and elsewhere in the letters.

The scheme for analysis consisted of eight subsections which were identical for the assignment and spontaneous letters:

Section 1:

a. The type of letter: assignment or spontaneous letters.

b. The salutation, with all the alternatives identified in the initial analysis.

c. The ending, with all the alternatives identified previously.

Section 2:

The use of honorifics, and, in view of the term "alerters" used by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989:17), also their position: in the request, apology, promise or elsewhere.

Section 3:

The number of requests made in the letter were indicated here.

Section 4:

The format of more or less appropriate requests was noted. In each case the place of the request (first, second or third request) and the explicit markers of politeness (Van Rensburg 1987:161) 'please', 'sincerely' and 'kindly' were noted. (These were the only three lexical modifiers that appeared in the letters.)

In terms of the nature of the letter and from what was observed during a preliminary analysis, three more or less appropriate requests were defined[4]. In each case variant forms were indicated and although these are not strictly grammatically correct, their mere usage was taken as an indication that the student had some sort of a 'feel' that these forms should have been used:

a. The hedged performative, particularly in the form of: I *should/would* appreciate/ like it if you *could/would* help me...

Variations on this form included:
- the use of *will/shall* and *can/will*;

- a mixture of past, present and future tenses;

- all three of the above forms with the passive voice used for the hearer/ reader, for example:

'I should appreciate it if my assignment could be marked.'

b. The query preparatory in the form of:

Can/ Could you help me...?

c.. Want statements as in:

I hope my request will be granted/will be taken into consideration.

The use of want statements has been identified as less deferent than the hedged performative and the query preparatory (Rintell and Mitchell 1989:267, Fraser and Nolen 1981:101) and in the letters requests in the form of want statements as described above, were not regarded as explicit enough. The form 'I really wish you would mark my assignment' does not seem appropriate to written requests, rather to spoken ones such as when an exasperated mother says to her son, 'Oh I wish you'd clean your room'. The form 'I want you to help me' is too direct for the relationship between lecturer and student.

As such then the 'want statement' can be seen as an additional request. For purposes of correlation the more explicit requests, in which the marking of the late assignment is explicitly mentioned, were studied more closely and given more attention.

Section 5:

The format of more or less inappropriate requests was noted here, indicating their position and the presence of internal modification as for section 4:

a. The use of 'May you help me...'

b. The use of 'legal' terminology such as:

I hereby/hereunder wish to state...

I therefore ask that...

I wish to inform/apply...

c. The use of obsequious forms:

I beg you...

I humbly beg...

I, your servant,...

I plead with you/Accept my plea.../I appeal...

I fervently implore/I beseech...

d. A mixture of obsequious and legal forms:

I hereby beg/plead.../I therefore humbly beg...

I wish to plead...

I wish to ask you to accept...

e. Direct forms of request:

With the statement of the necessary speech act:

I ask/request that you mark my assignment...

With the passive form for the reader:

I ask that the assignment be marked.

With the passive form for the speaker:

The marking of the assignment is requested.

Without the speech act:

Mark my assignment.

In the direct form of the request, the *position* of internal modifiers was also noted. In many cases the direct request was softened with a 'Please' in initial position. 'Kindly' was also used differently, in the form: "I kindly ask that you mark my assignment". These two forms were noted separately since they appeared quite a number of times.

Section 6:

The supporters and grounders, appropriate and inappropriate, were indicated in this section. Three types of supporters were identified:

a. An obligation is placed on the reader - this was merely indicated with a yes or no.
b. A promise was made - a distinction was made between a direct promise (I promise that...) and a promise with 'wish' or 'hope' (I wish/hope that I will never do this again.)
c. The format of the apology: as with the request, appropriate and inappropriate forms were indicated, the number of apologies and their position in relation to the request were indicated.

Appropriate apologies included:

- the use of *would*, such as 'I would like to apologize...'
- the use of forms such as:

I'm (very) sorry...

I regret...

I want to apologize...

I hope my apology will be accepted..

More or less inappropriate apologies were:

- the direct statement of the speech act: I apologize for..
- 'legal' terminology: I hereby apologize...
- obsequious forms: I humbly apologize...
- a mixture of 'legal' and obsequious forms: I therefore humbly...

The giving of reasons was also noted, specifically when it was thought that the reasons were too overwhelming (going into too much detail) or when no reason whatsoever was given.

Section 7:

The use of impersonal forms (as in, "I ask *my/ the course supervisor* to help me.") were noted here in the following way:

- no use of impersonal forms;

- use of my/the lecturer;

- use of my/the course supervisor;

- use of my/the circuit inspector;

- use of sir/madam but *not* as a form of address; for example, 'I ask sir to help me' instead of 'I ask you, sir, to help me'.

Section 8:

The use of past tense modal auxiliaries *outside* the request were noted in this section, each time indicating the number of times each form was used correctly and incorrectly. The following auxiliaries were included:

*could* and *could have*, *would* and *would have*, *should* and *should have*, and *might* and *might have*.

## 3 Results of performance analysis of letters

### 3.1 A comparison of assignment and spontaneous letters

Since the majority of letters analyzed were written as part of an assignment, their validity as authentic communication is questionable. However, while the analysis was done, and the assignment and spontaneous letters of one and the same student were seen right after one another, it became clear that these letters do not differ much at all. A statistical comparison between assignment and spontaneous letters was therefore done to determine the validity of assignment letters (the bulk of the data) as reflections of transactional competence.

The comparison of the assignment and spontaneous letters was done by means of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test which showed significant similarity as far as the formulation of both appropriate and inappropriate requests and apologies are concerned, but significant dissimilarity as far as the formal structure (salutation and ending) of the letter and the use of impersonal forms are concerned.

These results have a number of implications. In the first place, it does not seem as if students take much notice (beyond the format of the letter) of the way in which requests, complaints or apologies are formulated in the examples provided in their study manuals. Since the format of a letter is much emphasized at secondary level, the habit of focusing on formal aspects to the exclusion of the message of the letter may be a teaching-induced problem.

Secondly and conversely, it would seem that learners are only marginally influenced by the fact that they are writing a letter for assignment purposes, in other words not for real, communicative purposes. One would accept that more care would be taken when writing a letter for marks. However, learners could be distracted by the fact that the prescribed literature counts much more and demands much more attention in terms of time for pre-paration. Since the spontaneous letters exhibit much the same type and frequency of error and pragmatic failure, it would seem that assignment letters are a fairly good reflection of learners' level or degree of transactional competence. The similarity of assignment and spontaneous letters also implies that the teaching material does not serve its purpose: learners do not take notice of examples given there. This also means, in terms of Danielewicz's distinction (1984:243) between planned and unplanned writing and speaking, that both assignment and spontaneous letters are equally planned or unplanned, or perhaps edited or unedited.

In the third instance the significant correspondence between the two letters suggests that learners are at a specific stage of interlanguage development as far as transactional competence is concerned.

In the last instance, it would seem as if the assignment letter elicited more examples of onal forms and obligations on the reader. This could be due to the formulation of the instruction, which asks the learners to notify "your Course Supervisor" and "your circuit inspector" and to "explain the reason" for their request. Other phrases from the instruction recurred in the letters, for example, "should have notified" and "despite the fact that it is late".

Frequency tables for the use of the past tense modal auxiliaries *could, would, should* and *might* indicated that the correct usage of 'should have + verb' far outnumbers relatively easier forms such as 'should' and 'would'. It would seem, therefore, that 'should have notified' could have been copied from the instructions. If one accepts that the whole phrase was copied, that is, "you should have notified your Course Supervisor earlier", the relative high incidence of impersonal forms in the assignment letters (9,1% compared to 2,5% in the spontaneous letters) could be explained as a form that has been adapted marginally from the instruction.

In conclusion then, the similarity of assignment and spontaneous letters was taken as an indication that learners pay as little or as much attention to a real communication task as they do to simulated communication. The assignment letters can, therefore, be regarded as indicative of learners' transactional competence, although they do not constitute real communication. In those cases where the spontaneous letters constituted too small a group for significant statistical processing, the data obtained from correlations with assignment letters was seen as valid reflections of learner competence.

## 3.2 Correlation of request forms with independent variables

Since the focus of the present study is the use of requests, statistical analyses focused on associating the various appropriate and inappropriate requests with different independent variables.

In an effort to quantify the success of letters in terms of the use of request forms, all the variations on appropriate and inappropriate requests were ranked for formality and deference. Rankings obtained in studies by Fraser and Nolen (1981) and Rintell (1981) were studied and an attempt was made to include inappropriate forms as well, in accordance with rankings made by the evaluation panel. In this way each request, from what was regarded as the most appropriate to the least appropriate, was allocated a mark, from 9 to 1 (nine request forms seemed to merit specific attention as far as the evaluation panel was concerned), so that the most appropriate request would receive the most marks.

The final ranking was as follows:

REQUEST                              MARK ALLOCATION

1. Hedged performative              9
2. Query preparatory + please       8
3. Want statements                  7
4. Direct request with speech act   6
5. 'Legal' requests                 5
6. 'May' requests                   4
7. Direct orders                    3
8. Mixed requests                   2
9. Obsequious requests              1

The ranking was then used to give each letter a 'mark' which would indicate its success only in terms of the request used. The 'marks' were then related to the following independent variables:

- age,

- sex,

- place where the respondents teach,

- groups (standards) taught by respondents,

- whether or not they teach English as a subject and

- each respondent's first language.

The purpose was to see whether any of these variables might produce significantly higher or lower 'marks'. The only variables that produced higher 'marks', in other words which coincided with the use of more appropriate forms of the request, were the teaching of English as a subject and the respondents' first language.

As far as the teaching of English as a subject is concerned, the original frequency count indicated that 57,2% of all respondents teach the subject English. This group obtained statistically significantly higher scores on the rating of their requests, in other words, their requests were (albeit slightly) more appropriate than those of their colleagues who do not teach English.

The only first language group that scored significantly higher than other groups was the Swazi-first language group. They scored significantly higher than the two biggest first-language groups, the Zulu and the Tswana, and as the Xhosa, which is from the same language group as the Zulu. It is not clear why such a small group of students (23 or 3,6% of the students who returned questionnaires) should do so much better than other language groups.

Finally, the ratings were also related to students' own evaluation of their ability to communicate in English and to write an essay in English (elicited in the questionnaire). Students' judgement of their own ability did not coincide with a higher rating for students who thought their ability to communicate or write in English was good, or a lower rating for those who did not.

## 4 Two explanations for the use of inappropriate requests

An attempt to explain the use of inappropriate requests presupposes that one tries to find a reason for these forms so that they can be addressed in teaching strategies. As indicated in 2.2.1, the purpose of the present study is not to deny that there are varieties of English that exist as an independent code. Kachru (1981) points out that various Englishes exist and that their speakers have moulded the language to suit their purposes.

Although the researcher of the present study is also guilty of looking at the English used by the subjects of this study from a "pedagogical angle", this is not done with either "amusement" or "irritation" (Kachru 1981:15), but from the precarious position of both teacher and researcher: the former has to prescribe, the latter has to describe and explain. From this awkward position, it is argued that the request forms that have been observed as deviating from the norm accepted by English first-language speakers, can be explained from different angles. These explanations can be used for remediation purposes, but always in the context of longitudinal studies to determine the extent to which these forms of request have become part of a particular variety of South African English.

## 4.1 The role of past tense modal auxiliaries

As has been pointed out earlier, the occurrence of past tense modal auxiliaries *outside* the request was noted to account for possible avoidance techniques in the requests. Scarcella and Brunak (1981:69) suggest, and the findings in the present study seem to confirm their

assumption, "that such expressions as 'I would like' may be, for at least some L2 acquirers, formulaic devices not reflective of the L2 speaker's grammatical competence". In the field of writing Bracewell (1980:419) indicates that "one of the principal problems in learning to write is that mediating skills for language form, which use discourse and syntactic know-ledge, appear to be only minimally under the control of metacognitive skills that are involved with *intention and purpose* in writing" (emphasis added).

It would seem, from both assignment and spontaneous letters, that students are at a stage of their interlanguage development (they may have fossilized at that stage) where they do not control the use of auxiliaries such as *could*, *should* and *would* as politeness indicators, yet are able to use them in the basic sense as indicators of past intention or ability. A frequency count for the assignment letters reveals that *could* is clearly the form used most often, with *should have + verb* used more often than seemingly easier forms such as *would* and *should*. In fact, compared to *could*, *should have + verb* fares much better as far as correct usage is concerned: *could* is used wrongly in 13,8% of the cases, and *should have + verb* only 8,65% times. This is even more remarkable when compared to the very low frequencies for comparable auxiliary forms. This might be as a result of this form being used in the instructions for the assignment letter, as explained above. Compared to the frequency tables for the spontaneous letter, the *auxiliary + have + verb* forms are hardly used.

The high count for the wrong usage of *would* (outside the request) could also be an indication that students are still struggling to master this form at a basic level, which would make it very difficult for them to learn or acquire its use as an indicator of politeness. Compared to *could* and *should*, *would* fares particularly badly: *could* and *should* are both used wrongly in 13% of the cases where they were used, *would* is used incorrectly in 45% of its total use.

The reason could be because of the basic use of these forms in communication; that is, except for their role as indicators of politeness. Both *could* and *should* have the basic, straightforward meaning of past ability (or inability) and obligation, whereas *would* is more

inaccessible as an indicator of probability, for example in conditionals. This could, at least, be a possible explanation for the spread of frequencies.

The use of auxiliaries *in* the request seems to support the hypothesis that students may be at a specific stage of acquiring pragmatic conventions. Those request forms which reflected the use of the past tense auxiliary were in the minority. Of the total of 723 requests (in all their various forms) only 17,89% made use of the past tense modal auxiliary form. The use of modal auxiliaries in the hedged performative and query preparatory also indicates that students are in the process of learning or acquiring them as politeness forms. The hedged performative appeared 162 times as a request in assignment letters, and present tense auxiliaries, or a mix of present and past tense auxiliaries was used 51% of the time (for example, "I would appreciate it if you can/will/shall..." or "I shall appreciate it if you should/could/would...").. The query preparatory was used only 61 times and 49% of the time in the present tense.

It would appear, therefore, that students have problems with the use of modal auxiliary forms, both as part of the request and elsewhere in the letter, and that pragmatic failure could partially be ascribed to this problem.

## 4.2 The role of the first language

As far as the influence of the first language culture on second language forms of politeness is concerned, it can be said in general that the encoding of politeness in a second language must be the area of language acquisition that is most sensitive to influence from the first language, even more so than accent. Children are taught from a very early age how to be 'polite', and violations of politeness rules are judged harshly by parents. 'Polite' behaviour that has been instilled at an early age, and which governs social interaction will be difficult to change, expecially if the learner still uses the first language as a main medium of communication.

It was found that in Northern-Sotho and Zulu, the form of request that would be most appropriate in the context of student-lecturer communication, is the explicit use of the performative, as in "I ask/ request that you...". This accounts for the high frequency of this form in student letters. This finding is in agreement with that of De Kadt (unpublished) in her study of requests in Zulu and Zulu English. The conventional use of 'can' for 'ability' is used as such in Northern-Sotho and Zulu (the so-called *potential*), but not as an indication of politeness. Moreover, 'can' can also be translated with 'may' (as a hortative), which accounts for the incidence of the inappropriate "May you help me...".

## 5        Conclusion: Implications of the results of this study for English second-language learning and teaching

The problem of teaching, and therefore in a sense prescribing, sociolinguistic rules of conduct was indicated previously. Thomas (1983:99) regrets the fact that the teacher has to be prescriptive "to a degree" and cautions that such teaching "demands care and tact". Zapp (1984:61) argues that the teaching of a language must always be done against the background and in the context of first-language use.

In terms of the subjects of this study it could be argued that learners should be exposed to various levels of politeness and that those forms found most objectionable by the evaluation panel be indicated as such. In the light of Thomas's warning, this will have to be done with extreme tact, since a large number of these learners regard their ability to communicate in English as more than adequate. The possible prejudice which might result from inappropriate requests must be weighed against the possible injury to learners' self-esteem if inappropriacy is pointed out in explicit terms. It might be more useful to follow Zapp's suggestion by pointing out that first language strategies can be used in the second language, where applicable. In the present study the Zulu and Northern Sotho *potential* could be used to prompt the acquisition of the query preparatory.

It is also possible that mere exposure to a wider variety of social contexts might improve learners' competence, as suggested by Kaplan (1987:11) when he says that it is "the responsibility of the second-language teacher to increase the size of the inventory [of possible alternative sociolinguistic constraints], to stipulate the sociolinguistic constraints, and to illustrate the ways in which a choice limits the potentially following text".

It would seem then that increased input illustrating a wide variety of use is a first prerequisite for the remediation of pragmatic failure, but a second will have to be more specific feedback on letters written to the University. Although students do receive feedback on the letters they write in assignments, it is accepted among lecturers that students very rarely look at more than their final mark for the assignment. However, feedback might have more impact if lecturers answer spontaneous letters personally, trying to include an example of an appropriate request in the course of the letter. In research on the teaching of writing, it has been found that learners assimilate structures from letters written to them by first language speakers or their teacher, using phrases and sentences from these letters when they have to write again (Kilfoil and Van der Walt 1989:155).

Nystrand (1990:20) suggests that teachers find real audiences (other than themselves) for their students, and that the students try out drafts of written pieces on various readers, since "the writers' growth is shaped by reciprocity between writers and readers". In the case of correspondence courses this might be difficult to do, yet the principle remains that writers must have feedback on their writing if they are to improve. Freedle and Fine (1983:150) indicate that, when the focus is on the social function of language, even basic problems such as spelling are corrected by the pupils themselves.

If, however, one accepts that a new variety of English is used by the subjects of this study, 'correctness', particularly in terms of politeness conventions, becomes a very relative concept. Kachru (1981:34) mentions the "long battle of attitudes" and argues in his article on the pragmatics of non-native varieties of English for the acceptance of nationally stamped

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'Englishes' as independent and mature, not deviant, variations of English. The evaluation panel in this study regarded the request form "I ask that you help me" as acceptable, and ranked it as high as the query preparatory in terms of appropriacy. It might well be that this request is a feature of an emergent variety of English[5].

This study does not negate the existence of different national varieties of English, but it does postulate, within the confines of an English second language, teacher training course, an appropriate form to which learners are supposed to aspire. Much research needs to be done on language attitudes because the language use of learners may still seem 'deficient' in the eyes of English first-language speakers, and they may be seen to lack, to a greater or lesser extent what Chick (1985:318) terms "targeted behaviour" to indicate the fairly general (and sometimes vague) notion "shared by members of a cultural group of how a 'good' person should conduct him- or herself". Even if variant forms are accepted and understood by all, they may still stigmatize the speaker/ writer, and it could be seen as the language teacher's responsibility to prevent this.

## FOOTNOTES

1. This paper is an extract from a bigger research project. The full report is available from the HSRC, and I would also like to thank them for their financial support. The most important background for this project can be found in the work done on the realization of requests by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), and the work done on politeness phenomena by Brown and Levinson (1987).

2. Cumming (1989:86) notes that "only a few studies of second language writing have controlled for obvious intervening variables - such as learners' mother tongues, previous education, and cultural backgrounds" and Schulze (1985:279), in conclusion to his study on politeness in English, specifically indicates the necessity of doing research on politeness strategies (in Brown and Levinson's 1978 terms) in written communication in general and letters in particular.

3. This description of tenor is in accordance with definitions by Gregory and Carroll 1978 and Halliday and Hasan 1989.

4. The terms used for these requests were derived from a study by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989:273-294). From their list of nine request forms, the three types mentioned in the analysis were the only ones regarded as appropriate to both the written mode and the circumstances of the communication.

5. See Buthelezi 1989, De Kadt (unpublished) and Van der Walt 1993 for more discussion on this topic.

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