

# The international business approach to Foreign language teaching: Résumé/CV design<sup>1</sup>

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## Resumen

Los profesores de inglés para fines específicos suelen apoyar su labor docente en aproximaciones de tipo lingüístico. En muchas ocasiones, el profesor se limita al estudio de la terminología, la sintaxis y el análisis de ciertos géneros (como el *abstract*). Sin embargo, los teóricos de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras que trabajan en el contexto de la Unión Europea mantienen que enseñar culturas es tan importante como enseñar lenguas. En efecto, los licenciados y diplomados que han aprendido listas de vocabulario y que saben cómo redactar un *abstract* en una lengua extranjera difícilmente lograrán prosperar en el mercado de trabajo europeo. En mis clases de inglés para fines específicos he enseñado a mis estudiantes a diseñar un curriculum en inglés británico. La experiencia despertó el interés de mis discentes, y les ha hecho ver que para trabajar –y acceder– a un mercado de trabajo extranjero es preciso poseer unos conocimientos de la cultura en cuestión. En este ensayo presento el método didáctico que he seguido para enseñar a mis estudiantes españoles cómo diseñar un curriculum en inglés británico.

## Summary

Teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) often rely on a linguistic approach. Terminology, syntax and the analysis of certain genres –particularly the abstract– bias ESP teaching in many instances. Yet foreign language (FL) theoreticians in the European Union proclaim that teaching cultures is as important as teaching languages. Indeed college graduates who have learned lists of vocabulary and know how to write an abstract in a FL will hardly success in the pan-European job market. I have recently taught my Spanish students of ESP how to write a résumé in British English. The experience has turned out intriguing to my learners, who have understood that in order to work in –even to access– a foreign job market, one needs to have a thorough knowledge of many cultural aspects of the foreign culture. This paper presents the didactic method I have followed to teach Spanish students how to design a résumé in British English.

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## Introduction

Business is a common point of interest to all areas of expertise that benefit from foreign language teaching (FLT) for specific purposes –the aim of all professionals is the same: to sell the product they manufacture or deal with. In an educational background the teacher is to be aware that the first thing his/her students will need to sell is themselves. Instructing how to sell –and how not to undersell– in the FL class is increasingly relevant, especially at European universities, since the European Union allows all its citizens to work in any of its member countries, either to settle down or just to stay temporarily for practical training purposes and achieving a higher proficiency of a foreign language<sup>2</sup>. Spanish graduates are a very interesting case study: unemployment in Spain is particularly high and causes many graduates who have systematically failed in their job search to consider working in an English-speaking country –in order to make a break-through in the job market and improve their English. While in former decades these graduates needed to travel to Britain and find a first under-paid job that helped them keep the pot boiling until they found a post suitable to their qualifications, in the 90's those willing to emigrate can access the web sites of British companies and apply from home thus avoiding the risks of the foreign adventure. With such convenient technical advances, teaching how to design a résumé has become one of the chief priorities in the FL class, not only for Business Administration majors, but to almost any other students.

Since the 97-98 academic year, I have included in the syllabi of my classes of English for Specific Purposes a chapter dealing with résumé design. Keeping in mind that the vast majority of Spanish students/graduates who decide to seek employment in an English-speaking country will choose either Great Britain or Ireland –because of the proximity and their eligibility to work there–, I preferred to teach British English rather than American English. (Nonetheless, a view on résumés in American English can scarcely take a couple of classes after the students have learned to write a British curriculum vitae [CV].) The experience has furnished me with substantial material to utilize in the future, and suggests that résumé design and all the skills it involves are both interesting and complex enough to take up a whole semester. In order to teach how to design a British CV I took 3 steps: (1) to explain how the British appointment processes work so that the students understand the actual aims of a CV; (2) to ask the

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<sup>2</sup> Educational institutions and governments in the European Union are aware of this and have bent backward to offer students opportunities to become more knowledgeable about other European nationalities. See Green (1995) and Prodromou (1989).

students to write a CV in English, and then show them their mistakes; (3) to explain the sections and layout of a British CV and the vocabulary it usually conveys. Finally, I handed out samples of application forms and medical questionnaires –both often required in application procedures.

### **Cultural considerations concerning the aims of the CV**

Different job selection procedures demand different types of *résumés*. My Spanish students were, obviously, only acquainted with the employment policies of Spanish companies. As mentioned previously, Spanish unemployment rates rank very high in the European Union; many college graduates do not know how to pursue a job search: vacancies are seldom advertised in local papers; and the most reliable source is often the journals and memoranda printed and mailed out by professional associations to their members. Many job seekers thus decide to mail their *résumés* to a number of potential employers, asking these randomly-targeted companies to file their *résumés* and contact them whenever they may have a vacancy the *résumé*-sender's professional profile matches. Such misdirected *résumés* are not aimed at a particular job description and therefore provide much information.

These unrequested-*résumé*-senders are usually aware that the contents of a *résumé* must be kept to a prudential length; however, provided they are not responding to a particular job advertisement, they feel they must include as much information about their abilities as they possibly can. Considering the extremely lenient academic admissions policies in Spanish universities, many believe that the more merits a *résumé* highlights the better. Indeed while in Britain students with a G.P.A. lower than 2.0 (i.e. C) are never admitted into postgraduate programs, Spanish students with a minimal pass G.P.A. have full access to doctorate programs. Although not acknowledged by the Spanish government, universities, banks and newspapers alike offer postgraduate courses and master programs. The only requirement students face to be admitted is to meet payment of the expensive fees: 600,000 pesetas (i.e. 4,000 American dollars) and 3-month attendance to classes are in many instances all it takes to earn one of these Spanish masters. Consequently, graduates who cannot find a job usually enroll in one or more postgraduate programs, what results in longer *résumés*.

Questioning my students about what is to be included in a *résumé*, someone suggested that it is very important to slip over the line into inventing achievements. The rest of the learners agreed, arguing that they were confident other applicants would most likely make up merits. My students excused themselves alleging that the only way to avoid their competitors' unfair cheating was to cheat –here the whole issue on

the *Spanish picaresque*, of course, arose. Governmental institutions are indeed aware of such trickery and have decided to fight it by asking the applicants to provide xerox-copies of documents certifying the information in the *résumé* is true –those points that are not certified are not allowed for. This results in an even thicker *résumé*. Most Spanish graduates design long *résumés* with all kind of details and to which they enclose all certifications they keep. (It is important to point out that while most private companies in Spain make appointments after interview, most governmental institutions operate a selection process that does not include an interview; consequently, the applicants are aware that the *résumé* is their only chance to succeed.)

British appointment procedures differ from those in Spain. There are usually 4 stages in the selection procedure: applications are received; a short-list is obtained; short-listed candidates are interviewed; after which the successful applicant is appointed. Therefore, the aim of the British CV is to get an interview, not the appointment. Almost all posts are advertised, at least in local newspapers –big companies and governmental institutions do in the national press. These advertisements are very concise: they give the post profile, and often invite prospective applicants to request further information –usually an application package with a personal criteria specification, against which the short-list will be obtained. The CV must include only that information which shows the selection panel that the applicant meets the essential criteria for the post. Any additional information which is not relevant to the post may be brought up at interview but not in the CV for one reason: British assessors who short-list candidates look for the person criteria and are simply not interested in any further merits; they usually have many CVs to read and they do so on an *at a glance* basis –the more information there is in a CV the harder it is for the panel selectors to read it.

British employers never ask for CVs with enclosures; transcripts and other certifications may be brought to interview should the candidates be asked to; however, most employers only look at them after the appointment has been made. It is not advisable to include any of that false information my students seem to be so confident and fond of; I explained that their excuses on this particular issue are much less acceptable in Britain: while they expect that in Spain some applicants may lie, they should never assume the same happens in Britain. Finally, applicants are always expected to name at least two persons from whom references may be taken up. British employers do indeed contact referees and never offer an appointment without having consulted them –whereas many Spanish employers do not.

After all these considerations, I asked my students to apply for an imaginary post –pretending they had just graduated–: «Sales Accountant. Candidates must have a good first degree/university diploma, sound knowledge of at least a foreign language, and be capable of integrating rapidly into a dynamic team dealing with companies in the Continent. Experience is desirable but not essential. £ 12,000 p.a. Send CV with covering letter to: Mrs. Becky Smith; Birmingham Exports; Personnel Section; 13, Victoria St.; Birmingham B12 1A1».

### Covering Letter

Students of FL for Specific Purposes have usually been taught how to write business letters. Presentation of the application must be thoroughly neat; therefore, the covering letter ought to comply with British standards, in the case of the proposed job:

Applicant's Name  
Applicant's Address

Mrs. Becky Smith  
Personnel Section  
Birmingham Exports  
13, Victoria St.  
Birmingham B12 1A1

Date

Dear Mrs. Smith,

POST OF SALES ACCOUNTANT

Text

I shall be looking forwards to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Applicants's Name

Encl: CV

The «Text» should indicate briefly –but clearly and cogently– the applicant's native command of a foreign language and abilities to integrate into Birmingham Export's *dynamic team* –and excuse lack of professional experience. This will suffice: a full statement of purposes may be mentioned at interview.

Although I had previously instructed my students how to write a business letter in British English, most of them followed the Spanish structure: sender's address in the upper left-hand corner; the addressee's below but in the right side of the sheet; date in the right side; no subject heading, etc. It is obvious that no British company that seeks to hire an administration employee will interview someone who cannot even write a

formal letter: it is therefore highly advisable to urge students to present the contents properly.

## Résumé Sections and Layout

The heading must read *Curriculum Vitae*. Spanish résumés, like American ones, give personal data as follows:

David Martín Morán, nacido el 1 de enero de 1975 en Madrid, con D.N.I. no. 7.777.777 y domicilio en Madrid (28000), calle Miguel de Unamuno 7, 7A, no. de teléfono 91-555-5555, y estado civil soltero.

British CVs, on the other hand, do it as bellow:

### PERSONAL DETAILS:

Name:	David Martín
Address:	Miguel de Unamuno 7, 7A 28000 Madrid SPAIN
Telephone:	00 34 91 555 5555
Born:	1 January 1975
Marital Status:	Single

Bold characters and double space between entries help present the information clearly. Spaniards have two last names; they need to be aware that British subjects only have one last name/surname. Therefore, in the case of David Martín Morán, British employers would assume that his last name is Morán, and that his first/Christian name is David Martín. This can be resolved by providing only the main of the two surnames, i.e. David Martín, or to hyphen both surnames, i.e. David Martín-Morán.

Like any other CV, the British is divided into sections, usually: *Personal Details*; *Education and Training*, i.e. degrees, secondary education being generally optional; *Professional Qualifications*, if any; *Work Related Training*, i.e. all those postgraduates courses and masters but only if they are relevant to the post; *Present Employment, or Most Recent if Unemployed*, indicating notice required; *Previous Employment*, indicating job title, outline of duties and reason for leaving, and, if part-time number of hours/week; *Other Relevant Skills*; *Languages*; *Referees*. Again, all the information must be presented clearly, keeping in mind the assessors' *at a glance* policy.

Unlike in most Spanish résumés, dates are put in the margin and in front of entries, e.g.:

94-97	DipHE in Statistics (2:1 Class) University of Extremadura, Cáceres, Spain
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While in Spain the chronological order begins with the oldest information, in Britain the most recent comes first.

It is also noteworthy that periods at the end of sentences are optional in British CVs. As section headings are bolded, other important information –e.g. degrees or positions held– may be underlined.

## Vocabulary

Vocabulary was indeed the worst of all difficulties my students encountered. Where the letter was not at all formal, the wrong vocabulary they employed made their CVs unintelligible for any British person. They translated *Títulos* as «Titles» instead of Education; *Experiencia profesional* as «Work Experience» instead of Employment. No one of them was able to describe their education accurately, as the educational system in Spain differs so much from the British: they found difficulties with the several *faux amis* and stating qualifications and G.P.A.s.

The basic vocabulary they need to know includes: qualification (*título*, e.g. National Diploma, B.A., Ph.D.), subject (*especialidad*, e.g. Statistics, Communications), class (*nota media*), A-levels (*selectividad*), public school (*colegio privado*), first degree (*licenciatura*), higher degree (*título de postgrado*); professional qualification (*curso de postgrado*), National Vocational Qualification (*curso de preparación profesional*).

As to the details concerning education, my experience suggests that Spanish students should be provided degree equivalence: National Diploma=*Formación profesional*; Diploma of Higher Education = *Diplomado universitario*; Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) or Bachelor of Sciences (B.S.) = *licenciado*<sup>3</sup>; and Ph.D = *doctor*. Keeping in mind that the Spanish master and postgraduate certificate and diploma programs are unacknowledged by the Spanish government, and that they require much less of an effort to be earned, it would be untruthful to translate them as master's degrees or postgraduate certificates and diplomas. Instead, such education must be presented as work related training. Degree class also demands attention: First Class should be *Sobresaliente*; 2:1 Class is *Notable*; 2:2 Class is *Aprobado/Bien* (6-7); and Third Class

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<sup>3</sup> Many Spaniards who are scarcely acquainted with British degrees tend to translate *licenciado* as B.A. (Hns) being unaware that Honours are conferred upon successful completion of a research dissertation. Interviewers will want to know the topic of the dissertation; therefore only those who wrote a *tesina* (Spanish for B.A. dissertation) should present their *licenciaturas* as Honours degrees –failing to do so is not only inexact but can also be suspicious.

is *Aprobado* (5-6)<sup>4</sup>. Students must also be advised that *Profesor* is Spanish for Lecturer and that Professor means *Catedrático*: their referees were mostly lecturers that they presented as Professors, although most of these lecturers did not even have a Ph.D.

One may or may not agree with the equivalence proposed here; but, in fact, British employers will expect someone who holds a master's degree to be an outstanding student who has been selected among a number of candidates and who has been instructed thoroughly –not a D-student who has attended a six-month course organized by a bank or a newspaper or even an university. Not providing such euphemistic information from the beginning of the application process may save the applicant from embarrassment/disqualification at interview.

### Application Forms

Many British institutions require their applicants to complete application forms in which they ask what they exactly want to know. I handed out some application forms and asked my students to fill them up. This task was certainly easy after learning all the related vocabulary. Yet I also handed out a list of considerations they need to allow for<sup>5</sup>:

1. In completing your application form/CV remember:

The potential employer may check any of the details provided by you.

If you provide false information or deliberately omit any relevant facts it will disqualify you from the selection process, or if discovered after appointment, may you liable to be dismissed.

As a citizen of the European Union, you are eligible to work in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Those seeking employment in the U.S. will need to obtain a green card.

- (2) Application forms must be completed in full. Most institutions that provide application forms do not wish to receive a duplicate CV –check instructions for

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<sup>4</sup> The equivalencies proposed by the British Council do not coincide with these. The British Council states that First Class is only *Sobresaliente* 10, which is almost impossible to earn in Spain; and that 2:1 is *Sobresaliente* from 9 to 9.99. This is extremely unrealistic.

<sup>5</sup> This is a version of the U. of Northumbria(Newcastle) «Guidance for Applicants to Help You Complete Your Application Form», sheet that I adapted for the needs of Spanish applicants.



filling up the form. If you have insufficient space continue on a different sheet, mark it clearly and attach it firmly to the form.

- (3) Write neatly and clearly using black ink or type so that the form can be xeroxed for the selection panel.
- (4) Complete the form accurately. Make sure that you check the dates and details of qualifications and previous employment. Don't assume the selectors will know all about you even if you have applied before.
- (5) It is important that you use the space provided to explain your skills, abilities, experience and qualifications compare with what the employers are looking for in the job. Read the personal criteria specification, job description, advertisement and any other papers carefully and prepare draft statements before filling in the form. Try to say something about each criteria point.
- (6) Give examples and evidence to show why you think you have the right qualities for the job. Don't just say «I have experience in...». Give details of what you did and how you did it. Use positive statements about what you did. It is important not to undersell yourself but you must support what you say with examples of what you have done or what you understand about aspects in the job description. Not all of your skills and experience will match but may be transferable to the duties of the job. Explain how your skills may be relevant.

## **Conclusión**

FL teachers should not expect their students to success in the job market with only a list of technical vocabulary and a grammar book<sup>6</sup>. These are indeed necessary, however, they will not secure success in the job market –to both applicants and employers who need to judge. My students agreed that the time we put into learning to design a résumé was most interesting: some of them had never written a résumé in their mother tongue; moreover, they all conceded this was a necessary skill to reach and develop their professional expectations, and that spending more time on the issue would certainly be beneficial to their education. Indeed the first résumés they wrote in response to the advertisement from our fictive company in Birmingham would never

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed FL theoreticians in Europe have strongly vindicated –especially in the past decade– the relevance of acquainting learners with the target culture: Byram (1989) pays great attention to the social and cultural approach; Kramsch proposes to raise «cultural awareness» and to consider the target culture as «a social construct» (1993: 205) –which I sought in the «Cultural Considerations...».

get them an interview and were hardly understandable to any British person. Designing a résumé that is going to be submitted abroad requires not only to translate vocabulary but to render the information into a different culture –and they were not at all aware of this.

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