

“RELEVANT EXPERIENCE” – Résumé Tips for TESL as a Second Career

Joan Bartel

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Introduction

The typical résumé will have three to six sections – some are optional:

- Objective or Profile statement (optional)
- Highlights/Summary of Qualifications or Professional Profile
- Experience
- Professional Presentations or Awards (optional)
- Education
- Other or Interests (optional)

This article discusses mainly the “Experience” section and offers some tips as to how to structure and word your résumé so that it stands out positively among the reams of others.

When looking for a position as an ESL Instructor, before you even start writing your résumé, you should consider why an employer should hire you. If TESL is your second career and you have spent years working in another field, this question has special significance. You need to ask yourself why an employer should hire you rather than either a fresh university/college graduate with TESL credentials or a seasoned ESL instructor who happens to be out of work. Then you want to make sure that your answer resonates with the hirer.

All experience is relevant – but in a variety of ways

Experience, especially TESL experience, is often at the top of a hirer’s list of qualifications sought. In résumés this important section is often headed with words like:

PROFESSIONAL/WORK EXPERIENCE or
EMPLOYMENT/CAREER/WORK HISTORY

But for applicants with backgrounds in more than one professional field, it can be more useful to separate this section into two categories:

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE
and
OTHER EXPERIENCE or WORK HISTORY

Such a split can be very effective for several reasons. Most importantly, it allows you to move any relevant jobs up front, to the first page. It is said that hirers generally spend only about seven seconds looking through each résumé that comes their way. This means that they often do not even get to the second page – unless they are impressed by what they see at the beginning. By

dividing your previous work history into two categories, your previous jobs most relevant to TESL have the best chance of being seen even if they were not the most recent positions.

In addition, using a section called OTHER EXPERIENCE or WORK HISTORY allows you to summarize less relevant positions without many details. They should be mentioned only briefly. Besides first professions, this section includes any jobs you had during student years, survival jobs and volunteer work (labelled as such) that are unrelated to teaching or language.

The advantage of your varied experience: A combination of work experiences can put you ahead of candidates who have a background only in TESL, since a wider work history can help you to relate to a variety of adult students. You can also expressly point out specific skills or subjects that you are especially qualified to teach, such as Presentation Skills or English for Health Professions. Your years of work also attest to your interpersonal skills, reliability, time management and all the other skills gained from responsible employment.

“RELEVANT EXPERIENCE”

If you have been a teacher or facilitator in any field, in Canada or abroad, of course you portray that work in this section. A practicum or volunteer teaching position can also be listed in this section. But do not pretend that doing a practicum or volunteering is the same as filling a paid position; it was not – because you didn’t have final responsibility, and that is important. So label it as “Practicum” or “Volunteer work.” List your job duties as bullets under each point, starting with a verb.

If you do not have ESL teaching experience yet, you need to show how your previous work has helped to prepare you to handle a class of ESL students effectively. You can do this by choosing your words carefully. Just as mentioned above, every bullet starts with a verb, showing what you *did*. In this case, stress skills that you can use in the classroom. Choose verbs that show the relevance to ESL teaching, like “facilitated/trained/led/advised/determined/assessed/presented/organized/interacted with...” Downplay irrelevant skills – without altering the nature of the work. Try to use some of the key words from the job posting or school website here as well. Be sure not to use industry jargon or abbreviations from a former career that would puzzle a TESL hirer.

Be aware that if you include more than two or three positions in your former profession, it might look as if you have steeped in that occupation too long to be flexible. You can omit jobs at the beginning of that career. You might object here, saying, “But that leaves a big hole in my life history, if I don’t include early jobs.” However, note that, while dates are a must for work history, they are optional for education, as explained in the next section.

Dates

Positions should be dated and listed in reverse chronological order. They should include names of companies/schools and job titles. You do not have to include jobs older than 10-15 years,

when technology was not prevalent. However, if your less-recent employment was the most relevant, than go ahead and include it. The choice of what to list is yours. The résumé can only be a summary of your background and you should cull your life experiences in a way that helps the hirer see how you would fit in their teaching team.

Following EXPERIENCE, list your EDUCATION. If your college/university degree/diploma is not from Canada, many employers will want to know the Canadian equivalency; this can be documented by World Education Service or similar organization. Educational stages do not have to be dated. So if you are doing TESL as a mid-life career transition and you do not put dates on your degree(s), then you can subtly leave out the first years of work. But of course hiring managers know that trick too, so if your degree is not dated, they will guess that you are not a recent graduate. Fortunately, having some life experience can be seen as an asset when teaching adults.

Conclusion

If you are entering the TESL field as a second, or third, career, play it to your advantage in your résumé. Highlight your relevant life experience, and especially your last several years of work, since experience is often at the top of the wish list in job postings for schools and other TESL work places. You can do this by:

- Listing jobs/practica/volunteer work related to teaching and languages first under RELEVANT EXPERIENCE.
- Making the relevance of all previous positions clear to the hirer by using verbs related to teaching duties wherever possible.
- Limiting the number of less relevant jobs, and the bullets under them, to show that you are not still immersed in a former career.
- Using some key words from the website of the job posting (good advice for all résumé-writers).

A résumé is a selective summary of your life and it is up to you to effectively show the prospective employer how well your qualifications – both the specific ones listed in the job posting as well as your general life experience – meet the hirer's needs. Good luck to you!