

TEACHING RESUME WRITING: COMPARING TWO PERSPECTIVES TO ENHANCE CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complexities underlying resume writing in relation to current recruitment practices and classroom instruction in Singapore. Interviews were conducted with several corporate personnel from the private and public sectors to identify the essential elements of an effective resume. The findings were then compared with the opinions gathered from a survey administered to a group of university lecturers teaching a course on resume writing. The results of the study showed that differing opinions about what constitutes an effective resume exist between the corporate personnel and lecturers. We argue that classroom instruction for teaching resume writing or any other professional genre should include the voices of corporate personnel. It should also adopt a dialogic approach which would allow learners to critically engage in the writing process by paying close attention to socio-cultural contexts.

Background of the Study

The advent of the internet has brought about many changes to the recruitment process. In the past, the job-seeking ritual usually began with the job seeker going through newspaper job advertisements and then preparing a job application package which typically consisted of a job application letter and a resume. At present, with the ubiquity of the information superhighway, more and more job vacancies can be found online with just a click of the mouse providing job seekers with an expansive avenue to search for their desired jobs. Moreover, the internet has also made applying for jobs much more convenient. In the past postal mail was the vehicle for sending out job applications but now job seekers can submit their job applications online and it is usually received by the hiring managers within seconds.

Although the internet has improved the recruitment process to a large extent and expedited communication between hiring managers and job applicants, it has not removed certain traditional practices in the recruitment process. For instance, in most cases, job seekers are still compelled to prepare their resumes as the first step towards clinching an employment opportunity. Resumes still play an integral role in the recruitment process. It is often perceived as an important business document that creates a great impact on actual recruitment (Scollon & Scollon, 2002, p. 54). For job seekers, a well-written resume is the first step in attracting employment opportunities. For recruiters, resumes help to sieve out potential candidates before they are called up for job interviews. Either way, an effective resume creates a potential job opportunity and it is ever more important for both job seekers as well as recruiters in the increasingly competitive and globalized job market.

In some parts of the world resume writing has turned into a lucrative business. For instance, professional resume writing is a stable industry in America (Scollon & Scollon, 2002). On the other hand, in Singapore, job applicants employ the services of professional resume writers for support. Local bookstores and libraries are stocked with a large variety of books on resume writing, many originating from North America. Furthermore, many tertiary institutions in Singapore offer professional writing courses which almost always include resume writing. The wide range of resources available should no doubt enlighten job applicants, especially fresh graduates or would-be graduates on what constitutes an effective resume. However, our teaching experience seems to tell us otherwise.

The impetus for this study was from our experience teaching resume writing in a communication skills course for final-year students at a Singapore university. Our experience reaffirmed the findings of past studies which conclude that a gap exists between the classroom and the workplace (Brown & Herndl, 1986; Barbara, Celani, Collins & Scott, 1996; Crosling & Ward, 2002). We encountered this firsthand when we received feedback from our students that what we taught them about resume writing was somewhat different from information they had obtained from a resume writing workshop organized by the university's career centre. While we suggested to our students to separate their resumes into clearly defined headings such as "Educational Qualifications" and "Work Experience" to describe such experiences exclusively, the trainer from the workshop provided a different suggestion. According to this trainer, all experiences within a particular time frame should be included under the same heading regardless of their differences or similarities. For instance, for a final-year university student in Singapore, university life typically encompasses studies, industrial attachment, extra-curricular activities and possibly some part-time work. Based on the trainer's recommendation, a

graduating student's resume should include a heading entitled, "Educational Background" which contains all experiences, such as those mentioned above which are related to university life. Besides this minor "conflict" with the trainer who purportedly belongs to the corporate world, our knowledge about resume writing was also constantly challenged by some of our mature students who had had some working experience before resuming their studies. They wanted to know if our instruction aligns with real-world practices since they could not agree with some of our recommendations such as not including a photo, excluding personal information, writing short phrases instead of paragraphs and so on.

Resume writing is a major component in the communication skills course that we were teaching to graduating students at the university. Many of the students enrolled in the course were motivated to learn about resume writing to prepare for their real job applications. We felt that it was our responsibility to provide accurate information that would enable them to write their resumes confidently, thus leading them to securing job interviews. But to do this, we had to ensure that our classroom instruction coincided with actual recruitment practices. To provide reliable information about resume writing from the standpoint of academia which is sometimes perceived as far removed from reality such as in the case of ESP pedagogy (Adam & Artemeva, 2002; Auerbach, 2002; Belcher, 2004), we felt that it was important to hear the voices of professionals involved in the recruitment process. This paper therefore, is a preliminary attempt to explore the perceptions of corporate personnel and language educators in order to gain insights into the extent of the gap between real world expectations and classroom instruction. By giving a voice to professionals who are involved in the actual recruitment process, it is hoped that this study can raise awareness amongst language educators to realign the genre-based approach with socio-cultural contexts in relation to teaching resume writing. More importantly, students need to realise that resumes are representations of themselves in the world and should take on different appearances depending on the disciplines involved. Therefore, they should not use a one-size-fits-all approach to write their resumes.

The Genre-based Approach and Resume Writing

Advancements in technology, growth in scholarly communication and especially increased mobility of foreign students to English speaking domains during the mid-80s and early 90s required language educators to radically shift from teaching generalist English to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which later branched out into teaching English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and so on. This change was based on the rationale that uninitiated

learners were unable to engage effectively with the discourses of their new disciplines. According to Belcher and Briane (1995), the process of learning to cope in a new discourse community can be described as cognitive and social; cognitive because it involves thought processing with specific objectives for a specific audience and social because it is produced specifically for a narrow, specialized readership. Therefore, understanding the needs and expectations of a specific discourse community is imperative. The recommended approach was to explicitly inform new learners about the generic structures and lexico-grammatical patterns of a specific genre that is practised and accepted by their new discourse community so that the new knowledge gained will be appropriated, transferred and applied directly to their own production later (Chan & Foo, 2006). For more than three decades, the dominant practice in ESP adopted the one-size-fits-all genre-based teaching approach. Swales (1990) pioneered analyses of the research article in terms of its generic structure and linguistic patterns. The approach was also adopted in teaching business and legal writing (Bhatia, 1993, 2008). Similarly, for job search skills, one of the genres taught is the resume where learners are informed explicitly about its standard structure and general linguistic patterns (Locker & Kazcmarek, 2008).

Even though the genre-based approach appears to be the dominant approach for instructing ESP, it has been heavily criticized for not catering to discipline-specific needs and for being too dogmatic and prescriptive (Adam & Artemeva, 2002; Auerbach, 2002; Pennycook, 1997; Spack, 1988). Often the blame is put on inadequate guidance from language educators who have been assigned to instruct novice writers but who may not be in touch with the real-life contexts that their learners will encounter later in their professions (Belcher, 2004). Researchers also found that in reality, structural and linguistic rhetorical patterns vary across disciplines, giving grounds for further criticisms of Swales' earlier and other similar genre-based approaches (Cheng, 2006, 2008; Flowerdew, 2005). The main criticism of this traditional approach is that it is too form-focused and does not adequately guide learners to engage meaningfully with a new genre so that they can communicate effectively in the real world. In reaction to this, current research is recommending a better understanding of learners and their learning processes over the traditional focus on product (Cheng, 2006, 2008). In his later work, Swales (2004) moves away from promoting his simplistic genre formula and instead calls for greater learner autonomy by encouraging learners to arrive at their own conclusions through mini-analyses of new discourses that they encounter. Others argue for learner-immersion in target situations (Artemeva & Logie, 2002).

Using the traditional genre-based approach for teaching resume writing will also result in the above challenges. What is being taught in the classroom may not necessarily resonate with real-world practices. According to a study conducted with

a group of business people of diverse origins who were invited to review resumes from three different countries, there were a lot of contradictions between what they professed to do and what they actually did (Scollon & Scollon, 2002). The study also revealed that diversity in terms of culture, geographical location, organizational culture and job nature can affect or determine the characteristics of dynamic and engaging resumes. These realities as highlighted in the study had influenced the business people's responses. Based on these observations, the question of whether teaching the formulaic resume according to the traditional genre-based approach caters to the needs of the real-world remains relevant.

This trend of thinking coincides with the present study which aims to investigate the real world of employment to discover what employers look for in effective resumes and to match their expectations with classroom instruction. The findings should provide evidence in support of current research that the one-size-fits-all genre-based approach may not adequately prepare entry-level professionals to write effective resumes and that raising awareness about real-world preferences which are themselves constrained by diverse cultural, geographical, social as well as organizational factors is the way forward.

Methodology

This study sets out to investigate the disjuncture between the expectations of employers and language educators with regard to resume writing. Corporate personnel from the private and government sectors involved in the recruitment process were interviewed as they were considered to be the experts who will be able to provide valuable information about the features of an effective resume. At the same time, a group of university lecturers teaching a communication skills course which includes resume writing were also surveyed. Since we were keen to obtain pertinent information that could aid us in helping our students write their resumes, we asked our participants to focus only on entry-level resumes when giving their opinions.

Corporate Personnel

Corporate personnel who were interviewed came from a diverse group of professionals attached to multinational corporations (MNCs), government statutory boards and local engineering companies. In total, eleven participants were interviewed. They had all been actively involved in gate-keeping exercises for entry-level executive, mid-level management, high-level management and executive positions in their respective organizations. They are also highly qualified and experienced in human resource management, each with more than ten years

of industrial experience and had all undergone training in professional human resources. The face-to-face, structured interview was employed in order to obtain comprehensive and elaborated responses from the participants for each interview question. They were personally invited for the interview either through e-mail or telephone. From our conversations with the participants, we realized that they were extremely busy professionals. Keeping this in mind, we sent them the list of interview questions prior to the actual interviews to give them ample time to prepare for the sessions in the hope that they would be able to provide us with comprehensive information. Each participant was interviewed separately at a designated location of their choice, mainly their offices. Each interview lasted for approximately one to two hours. All the interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants and permission was sought for follow-up questions if further clarifications were required.

Lecturers

Lecturers who were involved in teaching Professional Communication, a communication skills course offered to graduating students of a Singapore university which included the resume writing component were invited via e-mail to participate in the study. Each lecturer has more than ten years of teaching experience. They were highly qualified and trained educators having read Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESL/TESOL) for their Bachelor's and Postgraduate degrees. Due to time constraints imposed by the hectic and diverse teaching schedules of the lecturers, it was a monumental task to schedule interview appointments with them. We therefore chose to use the survey method with them. In total, twelve lecturers were invited to participate in the written-survey. The lecturers were given a week to complete and return the questionnaire. By the submission deadline, eight questionnaires were returned.

Interview and Survey Questions

The same set of questions was used for the interviews and the survey to enable comparisons to be made between the opinions of the corporate personnel and the lecturers. Ten open-ended questions focused on the following three aspects: content, language and form (For a sample of the questions, please refer to the Appendix). As we were aware that the interviews would very likely yield lengthier responses than the survey, we provided instructions on the questionnaire requesting the lecturers to elaborate on their answers to each question as much as possible.

For ease of analysis, the responses of both the corporate personnel and lecturers were organized according to four major themes as follows:

- Characteristics of an effective resume
- Personal information and photo
- Sensitive information
- Three most important categories of a resume

Opinions of Corporate Personnel and Lecturers

This study aims to understand the extent to which real-world practices and classroom instruction differ in relation to resume writing. To this end, opinions were sought from corporate personnel and university lecturers teaching a communication skills course to investigate, according to their perceptions, the features of an effective resume.

Characteristics of an Effective Resume

The findings from the data revealed that the corporate personnel were more inclined to consider a resume’s content and style of writing in determining its effectiveness. On the other hand, the responses from the lecturers showed that resume layout and style of writing were more important aspects for determining a resume’s effectiveness. Table 1 shows a summary of the opinions of the corporate personnel and lecturers reflecting their differing preferences.

Table 1: Corporate Personnel and Lecturers’ Opinions on Effective Resumes

	Opinions
Corporate Personnel	Indicate career history with months and years Provide basic details such as nationality, race and age or standard particulars of applicant Highlight information that fits job requirements to catch reader’s attention Include results, achievements, facts and figures Include career objective which aligns with job requirements Explain what was done, achieved and learned in a previous job Include specific relevant skills Highlight best attributes Provide self-introduction Include clear and concise descriptions Give information in point form and short phrases Display appropriate sub-headings Use relevant keywords

Lecturers	Present information in an organised and aesthetically-pleasing manner Allow readers to process information easily Highlight selling points Use clear, accurate language Include short, crisp phrases instead of long sentences avoiding "I" Use lots of verbs Are concise Are grammatically correct Are well-formatted Are uncluttered, with useful headings Are readable, eye-catching and with enough white space
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Table 1 shows that words frequently used by the corporate personnel to talk about effective resumes generally include nouns relating to the content of the resume such as "career history", "results", "achievements", "facts", "career objective", etc. Even when adjectives were used, they also referred to the content such as "specific relevant skills, "best attributes", "relevant keywords", etc. This shows that on the part of the corporate personnel, relevant information pertaining to the job requirements is extremely important in an effective resume. However, it is not enough to focus only on the content of the resume as the corporate personnel also mentioned (although not as frequently) that applicants need to be able to prepare an appealing resume through their writing style including "clear and concise descriptions", giving "information in point form" and "short phrases" as well as using "appropriate sub-headings".

As their responses suggest, the lecturers seemed to be more concerned with the appearance as well as the language of the resume. The majority of their responses included adjectives relating to language competency and format. For instance, with the emphasis on form, the lecturers perceived an effective resume as "organized", "uncluttered", "readable, eye catching and with enough white space". At the same time, an effective resume, for them was also "concise", "grammatically correct" and with "short, crisp phrases" and "lots of verbs". It must be noted that since the lecturers' background is either in Applied Linguistics or TESL/TESOL and they teach communication skills, it was natural that they would be more concerned with the writing competencies of their students. However, in relation to real-world practices according to the opinions of the corporate personnel, it is important that equal weight be given to dealing with the content of a resume so that learners can be guided to write effective resumes that are not only linguistically-competent and visually-appealing but also textually-responsive to diverse contextual influences.

Personal Biodata and Photo

Healthy debates almost always ensue between our students when we discuss the inclusion of personal biodata and photos in resumes. This stemmed from conflicting information that was obtained by the students from commercial resources. Commercial resources originating from the west especially America generally include very clear-cut instructions about not including personal biodata and photos in resumes. This is because in America, legislation has been put in place to ensure that job applicants are not discriminated against based on personal information or physical appearance. Hence, in America, it is common practice for job applicants to leave out their personal biodata and photos in the resume.

Singapore displays a different scenario altogether. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the government body that deals with employment-related issues in Singapore does provide a set of guidelines for recruiters to follow when preparing job advertisements. One of the guidelines includes not requesting for the job applicant's photo as well as other personal details such as age, gender and nationality. However, according to one of the corporate personnel that we spoke to, these are merely guidelines which need not be strictly adhered to by recruiters. In her own words, these guidelines have not been "legislated by MOM". Therefore, it was important to determine if personal biodata and photos are important in a Singapore-type resume.

Interviews with the corporate personnel showed that in general, they preferred job applicants to include personal biodata in the resume although it is not mandatory especially for the private sector. In this case, personal biodata includes the applicant's age, nationality, interests and hobbies. When probed further, most of them conceded that they preferred to see personal biodata in a resume for three reasons: it could help to gauge the job and motivational fit of the applicant, provide a good introduction of the job applicant and give an idea of the applicant's level of maturity in handling the job.

As for the inclusion of a photo, the majority of them said that if it is requested in the job advertisement, then the job applicant must include it. However, they also revealed that even if it is not requested, it is still a good move to include the photo. They explained that photos of job applicants have been helpful in assisting them to match the credentials with the person, or as one participant puts it, "put a face to the qualifications". They insisted that the photos did not create bias. Furthermore, they explained that for certain jobs such as sales and marketing as well as frontline banking and finance positions, a pleasant appearance is necessary and so, the inclusion of a photo in the resume would be essential.

The responses that we received from the lecturers regarding personal biodata and photo were generally in the negative. They appeared to be more inclined towards

the position held by the western way of hiring. One of the lecturers commented that this is apparently the “modern way” of hiring. However, even though most of the lecturers felt that job applicants should not include personal biodata and photos in their resumes, they are still aware of cultural influences affecting the hiring process. According to one of the lecturers, Asian recruiters prefer to see personal biodata and photos included in resumes. Another observed that these are important only if the applicant is applying for a government position in Singapore.

The findings regarding personal biodata and photos revealed that context does play a very important role in resume writing. Although personal biodata and photos are not obligatory in a Singapore-type resume, the inclusion or exclusion of these items are oftentimes dependent on certain contextual features such as the nature of the job as well as the organization, be it a private or government organization.

Sensitive Information

In our study, we define “sensitive information” as information that may work against the job applicant if included in the resume in terms of the success rate in securing a job interview. We identified two types of information as sensitive; salary expectation and referees. Divulging salary expectation may disadvantage a job applicant when the expected salary included in the resume is higher than what the potential employer is willing to offer. Eventually, the job applicant may lose out to other job applicants in securing a job interview simply because a competitive salary expectation was not indicated. Unless the applicant possesses exceptional qualities or outstanding credentials, it is very likely that he or she will be deemed as demanding or perhaps unrealistic. On the other hand, referees can play an important role in the hiring process. This is especially when they are contacted by recruiters to provide character references for a particular candidate before he or she can successfully move on to the next stage of the hiring process. However, just like salary expectations, referees can lower an applicant’s hiring chances if they are not chosen carefully. For instance, if applicants are not cautious about whom they pick and end up choosing individuals who cannot vouch for their competencies and credentials, these referees will then work to their disadvantage.

Findings from the interviews and survey revealed that generally, the corporate personnel and lecturers held the same view about salary expectations. Both parties indicated that job applicants should refrain from revealing their salary expectations in the resume. Both cited the same reason for the exclusion; if the job applicant is unaware of the salary range for a specific position and therefore puts in a higher salary expectation, he or she may be unsuccessful in clinching a job interview. According to the corporate personnel, in most cases of hiring new graduates, the

salary range is already pre-determined by the recruiters even before the recruitment process begins. In Singapore, the salary range for a particular entry-level executive position can be determined by academic credentials and, exclusive to Singaporean males, completion of National Service. The corporate personnel were also quite unanimous in their opinion that salary expectation should not be included so that the applicant will not come across as someone who is money-minded rather than enthusiastic about the learning experience that can be gained from the job. However, they also added that salary expectation can be included if requested in the job advertisement but job applicants should provide a range with a clause stating that they are open to salary negotiation.

In the case of referees, the responses of the corporate personnel and lecturers differed. Mixed responses were received from the corporate personnel but most of them favoured the inclusion of referees. They cited the following reasons for including referees:

- Allows employers to do background checks of applicants
- Enhances applicants' credibility
- Assures employers that applicants are likely genuine candidates
- Helps commercial recruiters to do a quick reference check

Almost all the lecturers except for one reported that referees are non-essential in resumes although they can be included. Only one lecturer was of the opinion that referees are very important and therefore "must" be included in the resume.

The findings from the corporate personnel appeared to reveal that sensitive information provided in resumes may help them to create certain impressions of job applicants. It is therefore necessary for the lecturers to advise their students accordingly when deciding on whether such information should be included in their resumes as a way of creating a positive first impression which could affect interview opportunities.

Three Most Important Categories of a Resume

One of the things that we think students need to know when preparing their resumes is how to organize the different types of information that they wish to provide. In other words, we believe a significant feature of an effective resume is the highlighting of essential information by including them at the top or first page of the resume. This was investigated in our study by considering the top three categories that should be included in a resume.

In this area, the findings revealed a difference of opinions between the corporate personnel and lecturers. The corporate personnel considered "educational

qualifications”, “skills” and “experience” to be the most important categories. As for the lecturers, the top three categories included “educational qualifications” followed by “experience” and finally “career objective”. Experience here for both groups means some form of practical training received by job applicants during their tertiary education such as internships and industrial attachments. As for skills, they include relevant competencies that will enable job applicants to perform well in a job. For instance, if a job applicant is applying for a computer programmer position, he or she should have a set of relevant computer skills such as proficiency in well-known programming software and ability to troubleshoot programming problems. One of the corporate personnel observed that for hiring new graduates, good grades were important but this is not the only criterion that recruiters are looking for. They also want to know the skills set possessed by candidates to determine if they can do the job, which explains why skills and experience come under the most important categories for them because skills set includes the right match or combination of relevant professional skills with industrial experience.

Although we were specifically focusing on the resumes of new graduates or would-be graduates, the majority of the corporate personnel and lecturers did not think that young graduates’ extra-curricular activities were of great important; contrary to what many of our students thought. In fact, one of the corporate personnel used an interesting food analogy to sum up what recruiters were interested in when reading resumes; academic qualifications were the appetizer to whet their appetites to continue reading, the main course was the skills set aligned to the job requirements and extra-curricular activities were only considered as dessert. Keeping this in mind, the lecturers should therefore advise students not to provide too much information about their extra-curricular involvement so much so that it ends up overshadowing the other important categories which to the recruiters are far more important in the selection process. This is pertinent advice that should not be left out when instructing students on resume writing because from our experience, it was discovered that students tended to use up too much space in their resumes talking about their extra-curricular activities. They should be made to realize that ultimately it is their academic credentials and skills set that will help them to be selected for the job interview and not so much their active participation in extra-curricular activities. This is not to say that extra-curricular activities should be completely left out from the resume or should only be given cursory mention. As noted by the corporate personnel, extra-curricular activities should still be included in resumes to display candidates’ personality and interests outside academia but they should not feature prominently, downplaying the other more crucial information that is required in resumes.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study is an attempt to explore the perceptions of corporate personnel and educators in order to ascertain if classroom practice aligns with real world practice. In general, the study showed that the lecturers were quite aware of current practices relating to resume writing. This can be seen from the similar responses of both the corporate personnel and lecturers in terms of the style of writing, the inclusion of sensitive information and the most important categories in a resume. Nonetheless, it was also found that the lecturers were mostly unaware of certain resume features that are exclusive only to the Singapore context such as recruiters' preference for personal biodata, photo and referees. It was also revealed in the study that the corporate personnel generally paid more attention to content rather than organization and language compared to the lecturers. This is to be expected from them since their main aim in reading resumes is to look for concrete, specific information to determine candidates' suitability or competency to do the job.

As this study involved only a small number of participants, future research in this area could consider including a larger number of participants from both sides so that generalizations regarding the findings can be made as a possible reflection of the overall situation in Singapore.

It seems that educators are not completely out of touch with the goings-on of the real world as evident in this study. Given that resume writing is very much context-influenced due to varying factors, from geographical location to organizational culture, it would be appropriate for educators teaching resume writing to consider adopting a pedagogical approach that is less prescriptive where the resume is taught as a formulaic text in terms of its generic structure and linguistic patterns. Instead, a dialogic approach should be employed where learners are given the autonomy to decide on their own how to prepare their resumes based on information from various and contending sources. In doing so, they should be guided to explore multiple possibilities of writing their resumes through awareness of socio-cultural contexts. An integrated approach which gives due attention to the writing process as well as the writing product (Belcher, 2004; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996) by involving learners' active engagement with the genre through analytical thinking and critical questioning instead of strict adherence to the model text may be the solution. By adopting this approach, learners can begin to take ownership of their writing as they embark on meaningful text creation by being allowed to embrace differences within the genre and to pick and choose from these differences what can work best for them in varying situations. This is a crucial process for all learners needing to engage with workplace texts to develop into socially-conscious genre writers but educators need to take the first step towards its realization.

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Appendix: Interview and Survey Questions

1. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of an effective resume?
2. What generally appeals to you in a resume? (e.g. consistent organization of information, descriptive, specific information, etc)
3. Do you think it is really necessary for a job applicant to consider which type of resume (e.g. chronological or competency-based) to adopt before s/he begins writing?

4. Do you think the applicant's personal information/biodata (i.e. age, marital status, hobbies, etc) and photo should be included in the resume?
5. Do you think a profile of the applicant or a summary of qualifications should be included in the resume?
6. Do you think the applicant should include his/her expected salary in the resume?
7. Do you think referees are important in a resume?
8. In your opinion, how important is format and visual appeal in a resume?
9. In your opinion, what is an effective way to write about past experiences in a resume?
10. What do you think should be the first 3 categories in a resume? Please list them down in the order of importance.