

PROFESSIONAL APPLICATIONS IN ENGLISH FOR ARCHITECTS: THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

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Abstract

Interviews are a crucial part of the recruitment process for our students when they finish their degree. The purpose of an interview is to give the interviewer(s) a chance to assess the candidate's suitability for the role and for our graduates to demonstrate their abilities and personality for the position they apply for. A market and a professional portfolio research were analysed to meet students' needs in a work environment context. The Professional Applications in English for Architects: The Interview guidebook here presented deals with a very useful and representative sample of the activities and preparation that our students of architecture will need when they are first interviewed, either in an academic or a professional context. Interviews take many different forms; however the work activities enclosed in this guidebook work have been practiced and carried on in class. Some of our learners have already successfully tested the worked materials and tools in real interviews.

Keywords: learners, architecture, interviews, EAP needs, class material.

1 PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

The guidebook presented in here was designed in the framework of an English language subject in the School of Architecture at the Technical University of Madrid named "Professional Applications in English for Architects" with the target of preparing the students (mainly Spanish) to be able to effectively perform in future professional job interviews and scholarship applications, by learning: how to prepare for the interview; how to pick the right words in English; how to explain their abilities and qualifications for the job/scholarship with the right language and communication strategy; how to answer interview questions; or how to control body language, among many other issues.

The subject from where this guidebook was created, piloted and used, is an optional one created in 2001 and is becoming very popular year after year at the School of Architecture. This guidebook (focused only on interviews matters) completes one of the units for the subject, and was designed to be used by teachers and students. After different related research activities and after several years of experience teaching the subject, the guidebook was finally developed under the umbrella of a research group of Innovation (GIE APLAI) at the Technical University of Madrid.

The need for creating this guidebook comes from these needs of our learners when they are exposed to their first interview in English either in a professional context. Interview matters are one of the most difficult tasks for students not only because of the lack of language skills in a foreign language but also because we have to consider motivation and attitude, body language, self confidence, intercultural communications, etc. All these factors can be hard to take into practice even in our mother tongue. Students of Architecture have a visual and kinaesthetic way of learning (Úbeda 2002). Thus, the creation of a work just focused on interviews for their specific field was a good way to teach the English language and communication skills needed to deal with the most representative items and questions in such type of interviews.

The need to defend the students' most outstanding portfolio works in English as required by the marketplace, the need to generate personal and professional confidence in the Interviewer in English, together with the need to make the most appropriate use of English and communication strategies, were the thrill behind creating this guidebook combining these multiple objectives.

2 METHODOLOGY

The followed methodology was focused on two main stages each of them with specific aims.

The first stage basically consists of data gathering in a scope close to our students' needs.

Stage 1

- To design a questionnaire aimed at knowing the most important aspects of the architectural portfolio and quantify its importance with regard to the level of English language that it is required.
- To collect data on the most important items that architects have in mind from and into a workplace context when interviewing a candidate. A questionnaire was designed to find out the importance of the architectural portfolio and the questions a recruiter could ask in an architectural context.
- To ask the students from the School of Architecture of Madrid about the most common situations they think they will face in their first interview in English (Applying for a job or for a scholarship either in any foreign country or in Spain where English language can be a requirement.)
- To analyze and classify the data according to the level of English language taking into consideration the following models:
- To use as language references the following validated documents: The European Framework of Languages, as the level of generic language, and the Academic and Professional European Language Portfolio (ACPEL 2009) for classification of the questions and evaluable descriptors.
- To record the situations identified according to the representative scenarios, both in terms of student choice and level of English (Úbeda DVD 2011).

The second stage had the aims, through the design of the exercises, of tailoring the data previously collected and analyzed, of improving and using a proper language and communication in English when having a real interview.

Stage 2

- To find out the most representative skills for architects in published advertisements
- To work out where, these skills, and how can be used during the interview process.
- To identify and be able to create a career objective and a personal profile.
- To practice mock interviews by matching questions and Interview descriptors.
- To design a useful guide in a dynamic way to be use within the class syllabus or individually.

All the above aims are supported by real examples where the students can practice in a B2 English language level and upwards, in an architectural context.

The result is a dynamic guidebook divided into five clearly defined sections:

- *Introduction:* A brief background of the pedagogical context, methodology followed for this guide book that fulfils and supports a DVD created with students the previous year and used in class.
- *Working out skills:* This section will draft the most remarkable skills that an architect is asked for from a professional scope. In order to fulfil the lack of students' vocabulary, an extensive list of adjectives and exercises to improve this need has been provided. Also attention has been paid to working out what needs to be focused on reference to write a good personal profiles and career objective, depending on the position advertised.
- *Interview questions in architectural contexts:* Taking into account the architectural market requirements, a list of the most frequent questions has been selected providing a sample of the most common situations and the answers that a standard student with a B2 Level can produce.

- *Useful bank of descriptors in real interviews*: the activities and target premises in this work are sustained by the Academic and Professional European Language Portfolio (ACPECL Portfolio) (2009), a research labour awarded by the INAP in 2010. The selected questions and their answers which can be practised in class or independently, are matched with recommended descriptors.
- *Body Language advice*: Non-verbal communication is also part of the interview process, so the students' common lapses have been presented in a visual way.
- Finally the guidebook encloses a specific bibliography.

The subject where this guidebook was used is "Professional Applications in English for Architects", an optional subject of 5 ECTS. The average age of the students is 24 and the subject is currently offered to the students in their fourth and fifth academic year.

As educators, the most relevant areas considered to design this guidebook were mainly undertaken from the areas "*Interview questions in architectural contexts*" and "*Useful bank of descriptors in real interviews*", which both compile very extensive and important information for our students, and that will be described hereafter.

3. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXTS

In this section, the figures below provide in a clear visual way the results of a questionnaire that was designed to find out the importance of the architectural portfolio and the most frequent questions a recruiter could ask in an architectural interview. The questionnaire was sent to a sample of 80 English speaking architectural practices in order to find out the recruiters market requirement. Here are summarized and briefly commented the aspects in the work environment that will probably be evaluated by the interviewers.

Regarding to candidates' motivation and first impression see figures 1 and 2, the 45% of interviewers consider the applicant's motivation to be very important, and the 64% of interviewers think first impressions are important.

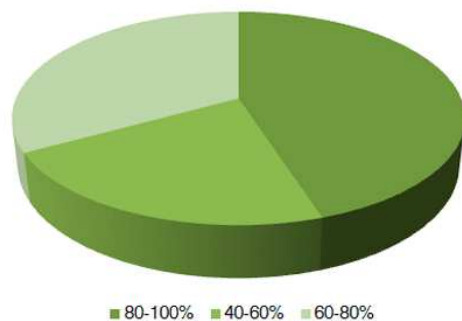


Fig. 1: Candidate's motivation

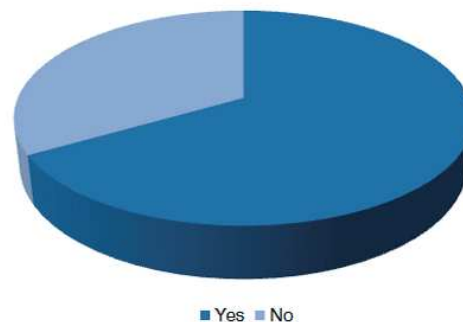


Fig. 2: First impression

Concerning language and communication issues when asking about how important is to have English knowledge to be employed, figures 3 shows that 50% of interviewers indicate that the knowledge of English Language is quite important. Fig. 4 shows that 78% of interviewers indicate that the social interaction (or lack of) is important. Thus, a good command of English together with a good social interaction during the interview process is remarkable.

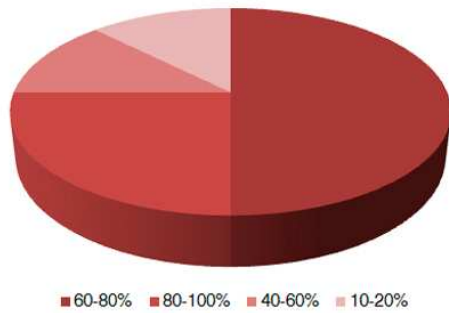


Fig. 3: English knowledge

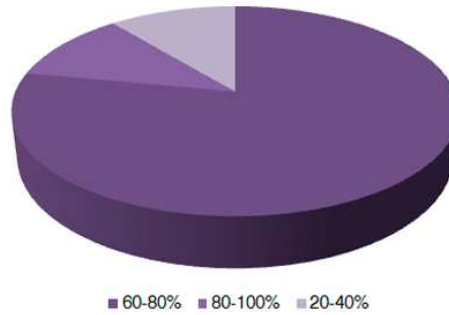


Fig. 4: Social interaction

Regarding the architect candidate's portfolio and the information enclosed in it together with the way candidates describe their projects during the interviews, fig. 6, shows that 63% of interviewers consider the portfolio to be very important; however in fig. 7, 55% of interviewers remember candidates with a very good portfolio failing the interview.

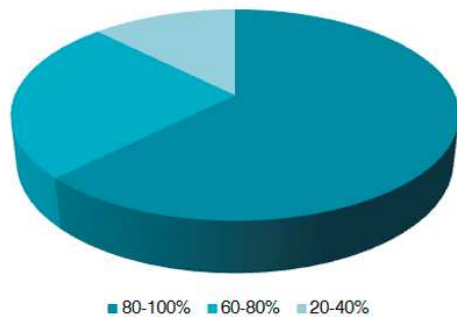


Fig. 6: Good portfolio

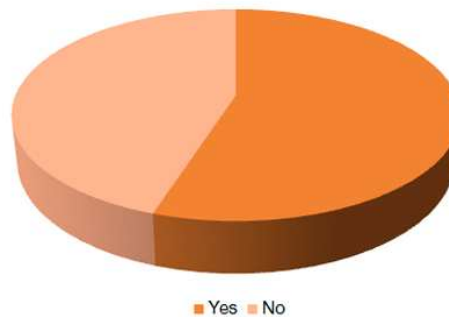


Fig. 7: Good portfolio/ Bad interview

When the candidate gets along with his/her portfolio where visual images and professional communication knowledge have to be shown in English the challenge is bigger. In fig. 8, 50% of interviewers consider the applicant's explanations about his/her project to be very important. In fig. 9, 75% of interviewers value the images of the applicant's portfolio as very important. Graphic design skills are pretty important.

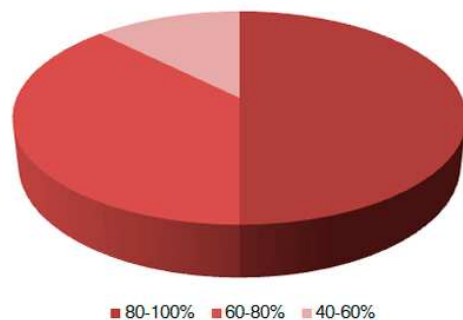


Fig. 8: Describing your projects

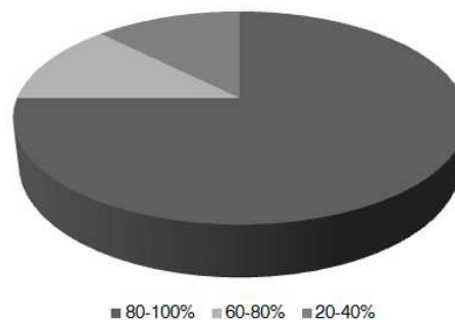


Fig. 9: Graphic design images

During the interview the candidate explanations and descriptions are required in English so in general terms, how important is to have a good communication in English when describing a project? In fig. 10 the answer is envisaged: the 57% of the interviewers consider Speaking to be important, whereas just 28% consider Writing as important. Listening is considered important by 43% of the interviewers. An average of B2 (Advanced) English level upwards is required.

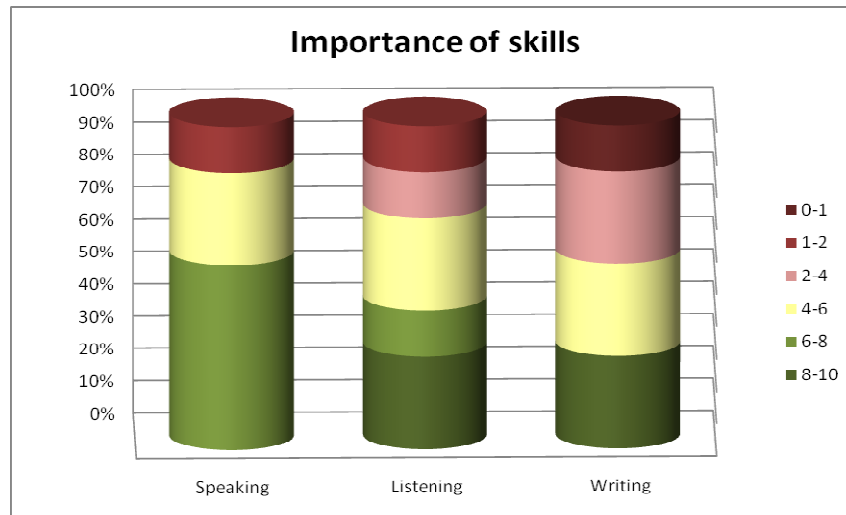


Fig. 10: English skills

The guidebook should take into account all these important issues summarized below in fig. 11, during our learners training.

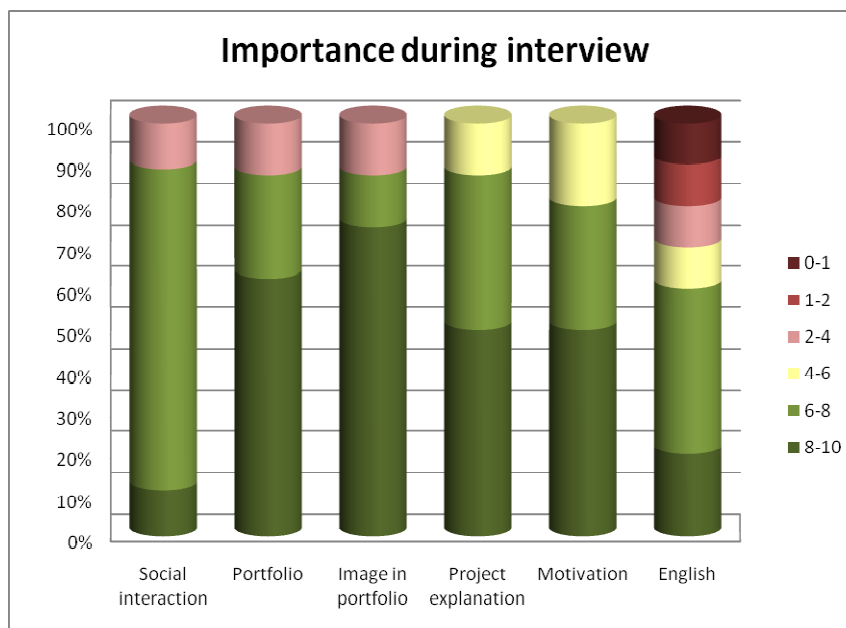


Fig. 11: General important issues during the interview

In general terms, in the field of architecture, during the interview process, the interviewers can use an Interview Assessment Form. It is used to take notes and evaluate the candidate's skills. The types of interviews include a "one to one interview", a board interview or a skype /phone interview.

An Interview Assessment Form is a sheet guide for the recruiter(s) to evaluate the requirements for the available position. In the assessment form the interviewer takes notes in order to check the gathered information, with the portfolio and documents presented.

After the interview and along the final decision of admission or rejection, the documents must be kept and sent to Human Resources Department with the completed recruitment file within 3 months. If the candidate fails the interview he/she can ask for this document to evaluate his / her weaknesses and strengths, as well as future areas of improvements

4. BANK OF DESCRIPTORS IN REAL INTERVIEWS

As it was mentioned in the methodology section, this work takes as a background reference the Academic and Professional European Language Portfolio (ACPEL 2009) (English to Spanish / Spanish to English), created by members of the group GI DISCYT from the Technical University of Madrid and validated by the Council of Europe with the nº 98.2009. All the questions in a job interview can be worked according to the language levels set by the European Framework. This guidebook focuses on English levels B2 upwards. The examples below are a sample of the content shown in it since they tend to be the most representative for the students at the School of Architecture in Madrid (Úbeda & Roldán, 2007).

4.1. What is a descriptor and why it is useful.

A descriptor can be understood as the linguistic competence that the student of a language has. In this guidebook descriptors for oral interviews that candidates could need for a standard professional interview in the field of architecture have been worked out. The use of descriptors provides the students clear, useful and relevant information about the language they use, by making them concerned about the learning process and self awareness of it use.

Here below are shown some useful descriptors matched with the required English language level fluency. The bank of descriptors shown in here has been taken from the ACPEL Portfolio (2009). However, since a descriptor is open to anyone's learning, any student can find the same or additional descriptors elsewhere, depending on many factors, such as the style of learning, level of the language, previous interview experience... etc.

The descriptors from the ACPEL Portfolio have been adapted to the set of questions that a student of architecture could find in an interview. The descriptors given as examples were competences acquired and created by a student. The levels of competences considered in here have been selected according to the students' scope level use in each question.

Now in order to envisage how the guidebook meet the market needs with the use of English language descriptors, some representative interview questions practiced and supported with descriptors taken from the APEL Portfolio are shown below. The answer sample given by our students of architecture corresponds to a B2 level upwards.

Example 1.

Interview question: *Why do you want to be an Architect?*

Students answer: Ever since I was a child I have always been fascinated and intrigued by buildings. The way they are designed and built, the purpose of them and the effect they have on people. So the main reason I wanted to become an architect was being able to say one day: 'I designed that'. Then, I realized that architecture, over and above building design, constitutes a significant combination of technology and culture approach to self-transformative capacity of society. And that is what really attracted to me. So in the end I decided to follow the path towards architecture.

Supported descriptors:

B1	I can express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference.- <i>Soy capaz de expresar sentimientos tales como sorpresa, felicidad, tristeza, interés o indiferencia y responder a los mismos.</i>
B2	I can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest, expanding significant points and giving examples, spontaneously or from notes.- <i>Soy capaz de presentar descripciones claras y detalladas sobre una gran variedad de temas relacionados con mi especialidad, desarrollando ideas principales y presentando ejemplos de una forma espontánea o con ayuda de notas.</i>
C1	I can attract the attention of the audience using appropriate presentation strategies e.g. intonational clues, voice volume, etc.- <i>Soy capaz de atraer la atención de la audiencia mediante el uso de estrategias y técnicas de presentación como pueden ser el volumen de la voz, la entonación, etc.</i>

Example 2.

Interview question: Could you choose one of your projects and sell it to me, please?

Students answer: Yes, I can. I could show you the Suspended Workspace system. Workshops are innovative methods of teaching that have become popular at the School of Architecture of the Technical University of Madrid, non-existing coordinate systems for teaching, working or display. Therefore, the challenge was to develop a highly flexible solution that could optimize floor space, accommodate cabling, and be easily reconfigured, while respecting the heritage of the building. In response, my proposal remodeled the entire lower ground floor to create an expansive and airy sequence of spaces which are fluidly bound together by a group of custom-designed, suspended-ceiling working units.

Supported descriptors

B2	I can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest, expanding significant points and giving examples, spontaneously or from notes.- <i>Soy capaz de presentar descripciones claras y detalladas sobre una gran variedad de temas relacionados con mi especialidad, desarrollando ideas principales y presentando ejemplos de una forma espontánea o con ayuda de notas.</i>
B2	I can give a clear, systematically developed presentation (of a project or a report) accompanied by visual aids to transmit significant points and relevant details.- <i>Soy capaz de dar una presentación clara y compleja sobre un proyecto o informe y usar ayudas visuales para transmitir las ideas principales y los detalles importantes.</i>
B2	I can use the third person point of view effectively to express ideas about own projects, avoiding the habit of always writing in the first person.- <i>Soy capaz de hacer uso efectivo de la tercera persona para expresar ideas sobre proyectos propios, evitando el hábito de escribir en primera persona.</i>
C1	<i>I can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects of my field of interest, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and finishing with an appropriate conclusion.- Soy capaz de presentar descripciones claras y detalladas sobre temas complejos de mi especialidad, integrando diversos temas, desarrollando determinados puntos y concluyendo de forma apropiada.</i>
C1	I can produce cohesive and coherent summaries according to genre conventions and follow the extension required.- <i>Soy capaz de redactar resúmenes cohesionados y coherentes según las convenciones del género y de cumplir con la extensión requerida.</i>
C1	I can use the appropriate vocabulary of my technical subject matter by relating to my previous knowledge about it and consulting different sources.- <i>Soy capaz de emplear el vocabulario adecuado de mi temática relacionándolo con mis conocimientos previos y consultando fuentes diversas.</i>
C2	<i>I can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure, which helps the listener to notice and remember significant points.- Soy capaz de producir de forma clara y fluida y con una estructura lógica y eficaz que ayuda al oyente a fijarse en las ideas importantes y a recordarlas</i>
C2	I can integrate figurative language within engineering texts in a creative and effective way.- <i>Soy capaz de integrar el lenguaje figurado en textos de ingeniería de manera creativa y eficiente.</i>
C2	I can produce different cohesive and coherent text types when translating material of my specialty.- <i>Soy capaz de redactar distintos tipos de texto cohesionado y coherente al traducir material de mi especialidad.</i>

The third descriptor in this question was created by the student. The learning process by using this method provides students with a powerful self awareness of the improvement of their language skills. The Professional Applications in English for Architects: The Interview guidebook presented in this paper includes a section with a complete interview where the hypothetical recruiter questions and the proper student answers are presented as the examples above.

5. RESULTS

The material compiled in the guidebook was piloted during two academic semesters 2011-12, in order to find the most useful and motivating tasks. Last spring term 2012 the students were asked *how useful they found the materials covered in The Professional Applications in English for Architects: The Interview guidebook*. During the piloting time, a group of 163 students were asked about the usefulness and/or future value of using this material.

At the time of the survey, some of them had already used the materials and tools in real job interviews, and some had not had the opportunity yet (fig. 12).

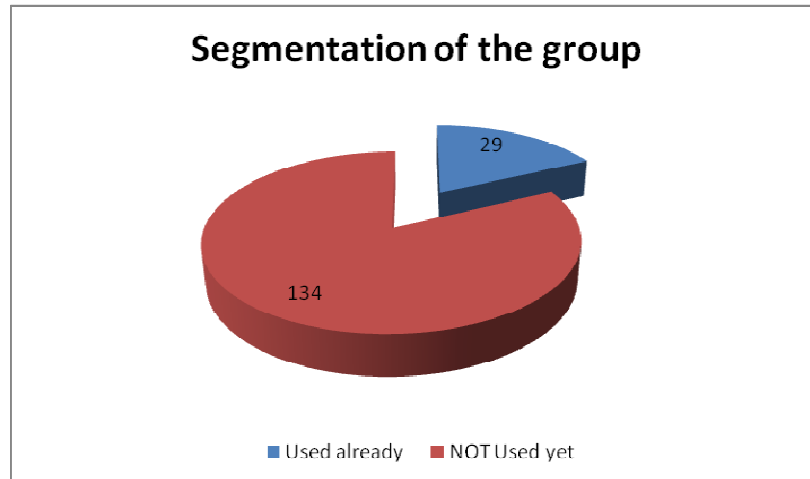


Fig.12: Segmentation of the group

When asked about the usefulness of the materials and tools in order to develop in an effective way the job interview, the subgroup who had not yet used the materials answered based on their perceptions and expectations. Positively, 86% of them thought the materials would be useful (46% useful, 40% very useful) as it is shown in fig.13. The most rewarding part of the survey was the answers of the students who had used the materials in a real job search; the percentages boosted to the point that 97% answered that the materials had proved to be useful or very useful, and 83% declared them to be very useful.

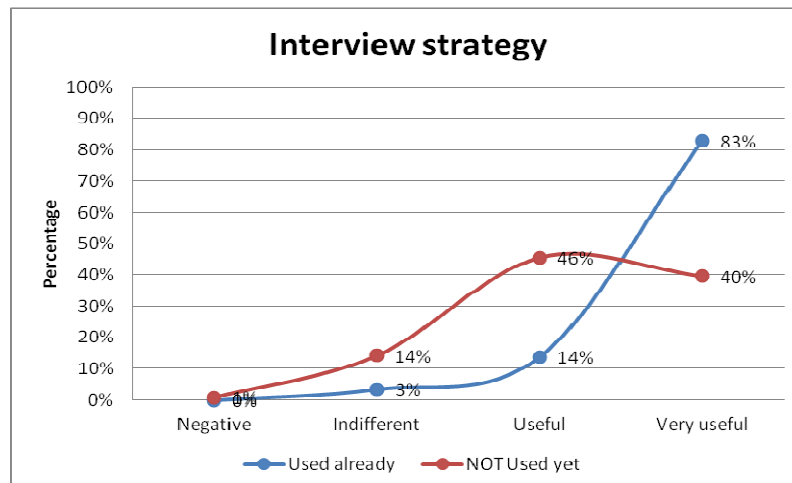


Fig. 13: Interview strategy

Regarding the language aspects and descriptors that had been developed and practiced in class, as it is shown in fig.14, the survey among the subgroup who had not used the materials yet, threw out a lower percentage of useful or very useful evaluation. This can be explained by the fact that the group believes to possess a certain level of resources to face such situations, and has confidence on that. In consequence they value less positively the language materials and tools. There is less novelty in the subject. But again, the real experience of a job interview makes the answers to move to the high end

of usefulness; 96% of that subgroup found the materials to be useful or very useful, being 72% the percentage for “very useful”. This means that the usefulness of the materials was really valued after using them in a not so familiar situation such as a job interview.

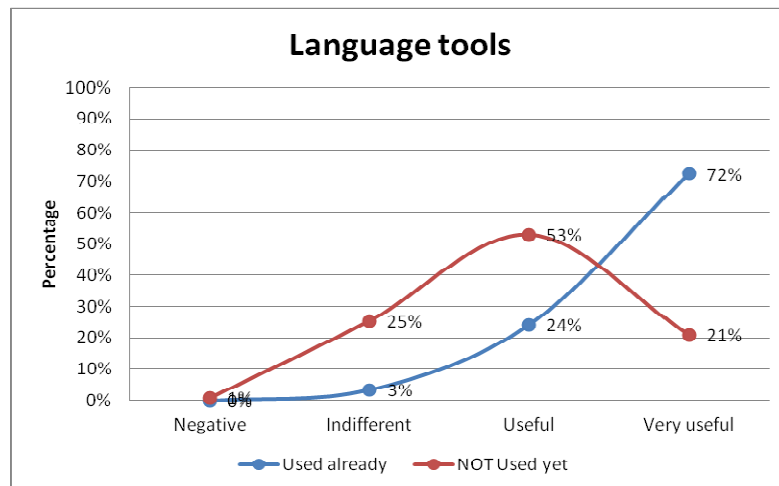


Fig.14: Language tools

6. CONCLUSIONS

The creation of a useful guidebook focused on a specific topic that addresses and solves a set of needs of our students in the workplace has proved to be highly positive and appreciated by Architecture students. The usefulness of the provided materials and tools has been specially valued when put in practice in real situations. The main conclusion is that the previous research was fundamental to properly meet the requirements, and the applied method, tailored to the group profile, was a key success factor as well.

Although this guidebook has been designed within the field and for students of architecture, we believe that the material enclosed in it could be easily and fruitfully used in the scope of construction and civil engineers. Our teaching experience has been very grateful rewarded by our students' feedback. Thus, we encourage other teachers to compile research methods and experiences into learners' helpful and rewarding bookguides resources.

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