UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE
ESOL Examinations

Experts in Language Assessment

# Business English Certificate

## HIGHER Examination Report

May 2008

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# Business English Certificate Higher

## Examination Report

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### WEBSITE REFERENCE

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# INTRODUCTION

This report provides a general view of how candidates performed overall and on each paper in the May 2008 session, and offers guidance on the preparation of candidates.

- **Grading**

Grading took place during June 2008, approximately five weeks after the examination was taken.

The four BEC Higher papers total 120 marks, after weighting. Each paper (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) represents 25% of the total marks available. It is important to note that candidates do not 'pass' or 'fail' in a particular paper or component, but rather in the examination as a whole. A candidate's overall BEC Higher grade is based on the aggregate score gained by the candidate across all four papers.

The overall grades are set using the following information:

- statistics on the candidature
- statistics on the overall candidate performance
- statistics on individual questions, for those parts of the examination for which this is appropriate (Papers 1 and 3)
- the advice of the Principal Examiners based on the performance of candidates, and on the recommendation of examiners where this is relevant (Papers 2 and 4)
- comparison with statistics from previous years' examination performance and candidature.

BEC Higher has three passing grades: A, B and C, and two failing grades: D (Narrow fail) and E. The overall pass rate for the May 2008 examination was 39%. The pass rate in China was 35%, compared to 75% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 4% of candidates were awarded a grade 'B'; (2% in the case of China, and 18% for the rest of the world), and 1% a grade 'A' (less than1% in the case of China, and 9% for the rest of the world).

Statements of Results contain a graphical display of a candidate's performance in each paper. These are shown against a scale of Exceptional – Good – Borderline – Weak and indicate the candidate's relative performance on each paper.

- **Special Consideration**

Special Consideration can be given to candidates affected by adverse circumstances immediately before or during an examination. Examples of acceptable reasons for giving Special Consideration include illness and bereavement. All applications for Special Consideration must be made through the local Centre as soon as possible after the examination affected.

- **Irregular Conduct**

The cases of candidates who are suspected of copying, collusion or breaking the examination regulations in some other way will be considered by the Cambridge ESOL Malpractice Committee. Results may be withheld because further investigation is needed or because of infringement of the regulations.

- **Notification of Results**

Candidates' Statements of Results are issued through their local Centre approximately two months after the examination has been taken. Certificates are issued about six weeks after the issue of Statements of Results. Requests for a check on results may be made through the local Centre, within one month of the issue of Statements of Results.

- **Useful Documentation**

Cambridge ESOL produces the following documents which may be of use to teachers or institutions preparing candidates for BEC Higher:

- *Regulations* (produced annually, for information on dates, etc.)
- *BEC Handbook* (for detailed information on the examination and sample materials)
- *Examination Report* (produced once a year)
- *Past Paper Pack* (available approximately 13 weeks after the May examination session, including Examination Papers 1–3, tape/CD and tapescript for Paper 3, keys, sample Speaking test material and Paper 2 mark schemes and sample scripts)
- *BEC Speaking Test Video* (for information on the Speaking test including worksheets for candidates).

In addition, online teaching resources for BEC Higher are now available (visit the website: http://www.cambridgeESOL.org/teach/bec/bec_higher/). Included are sample tasks, tips for teachers and students, and a range of familiarisation and practice activities.

**Users of this Examination Report may find it useful to refer simultaneously to the relevant Past Paper Pack**. This, together with further copies of this report, is available from the Centre through which candidates entered, or can be purchased using the order form online at **www.CambridgeESOL.org**

If you do not have access to the Internet, you can obtain an order form from:


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## BEC HIGHER READING

| PART | Main Skill Focus | Input | Response | Number of questions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Reading for gist and global meaning | Authentic business-related text – either a single text or 5 short related texts (approx. 450 words in total) | Matching | 8 |
| 2 | Reading for structure and detail | Authentic business-related text (approx. 450 – 500 words) with sentence-length gaps | Matching | 6 |
| 3 | Understanding general points and specific details | Single longer text based on authentic source material (approx. 500 – 600 words) | 4-option multiple choice | 6 |
| 4 | Reading – vocabulary and structure | Single business-related text with primarily lexical gaps (approx. 250 words) | 4-option multiple choice cloze | 10 |
| 5 | Reading – structure and discourse features | Single business-related text with structure and discourse gaps (approx. 250 words) | Rational deletion Open cloze | 10 |
| 6 | Reading – understanding sentence structure; error identification | Short text (approx. 150 – 200 words) containing additional unnecessary words | Proof-reading | 12 |

The format of the BEC Higher Reading Paper is based on six texts (or ten texts, when five shorter texts are used instead of one longer text divided into five sections in Part 1), with 52 questions of varied types (multiple choice, multiple matching and proof-reading). One mark is awarded for each correct answer, and the total out of 52 is then weighted to 25% of the candidate's overall mark.

Candidates are required to transfer their answers on to an answer sheet, as instructed on the question paper, with **no extra time** being allowed for this purpose. Once received at Cambridge ESOL, candidates' answer sheets are computer-scanned.

Part 1 is a matching task involving either five sections of a single text or five related shorter texts. There are eight items, each of which is one sentence, numbered 1–8, and each of which can be matched with only one of the texts or sections. The candidate's task is to read the sentence and then scan the texts to locate the one to which the sentence applies.

In Part 2, candidates are given a text with seven sentence-length gaps, and provided with a list of eight sentences from which they have to choose the correct one to fill each gap. There is an example at the beginning.

In Part 3, the task consists of a text accompanied by four-option multiple choice items, the stems of which may be in the form of a question or an incomplete sentence.

Part 4 is a cloze test, consisting of a single text with 10 gaps, which candidates have to fill by choosing the correct option from the four available to fill each gap.

Part 5 is an open cloze, i.e. a gapped text in which the candidate has to supply a word to fill each gap. Items tested may include prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, conjunctions, etc.

In Part 6, candidates are presented with a text of 12 numbered lines. They have to identify words (no more than one in any line) which have been incorrectly inserted into the text. However, some lines are correct.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

**Part 1**

Candidate performance on this task was remarkably consistent. When a Part 1 task concerns different companies, it is particularly important to read in detail and with care, as there is a lot of very similar information in the different texts. Weaker candidates tended to find the answer for item 3 in B; however, while B mentions a problem experienced by the company, the text says *'Green's job could rapidly be in danger'*, so any change of personnel has not happened yet. In fact, the key is D, given by the words *'The turmoil resulting from this strategy ... has resulted in the resignation of the director responsible for product and marketing.'* Similarly, in item 5 a substantial number of weaker candidates opted for A; however, while A does mention a period of rapid growth, the share price merely 'levelled off' – in other words, it stopped rising and became steady, but did not actually fall. For similar reasons weaker candidates were tempted by D in item 4 and C in item 6. Candidates and teachers should note that the sentences in the questions may match either to relatively small bits of text, as with 1A or to larger bits of text that need to be put together, as is the case with 5C.

**Part 2**

Again candidate performance was consistent across the task, with a slightly lower percentage answering correctly for items 10, 12 and 13. Candidates should remember to check that the option they choose should fit in both before and after the gap. With item 10, for example, F was a very common wrong answer. While a case can be made for a backward link here, there is clearly no forward link – there is no suggestion in F of finding yourself out of a job. In item 12, a substantial number of candidates, including some stronger ones, chose B. We can see this is tempting – B is talking about a person, as is the case before and after the gap. However, there is nothing before the gap for *'this'* to refer to, in *'to do this'* in B. Finally, in item 13, F is correct but G was a very popular answer. However, 'pretty much signed and sealed' in the text means that the buyout is virtually finalised, so there would be no question of getting 'turned down at a later stage'. Candidates should therefore beware of matching merely on a lexical basis, but should try to follow the line of argument before and after the gap.

**Part 3**

Candidates performed very well in this part of the test, the great majority answering correctly for items 17, 18, 19 and 20. This was pleasing to see, as most of these particular questions tested reading beyond sentence level. So candidates coped especially well on this occasion with questions that tested gist of a paragraph. Candidates found item 16 much more challenging, however. B was a very popular wrong answer with both weaker and stronger candidates. It is, of course, wrong because although Tony says 'It's easy to make snap judgements because you're so busy running the business', and 'Instead of a thorough testing process you tend to do it fast', he adds 'but eventually you come to regret your decision' so running the business ought not to takepriority over interviewing and the key is D. The second most common wrong answer was 15B. However, what Sally realises is very much about the value of psychometric testing, rather than anything to do with the people involved.

**Part 4**

This Part 4 task was particularly heavy with business collocations (*'set realistic targets'*, *'press releases'*), fixed phrases (*'make or break your business'*, *'a competitive edge over your rivals'*) and phrasal verbs *('get off to'*, *'turn something into'*). On the whole this part of the test was answered very well. Candidates coped best with Questions 21, 27 and 30, and found 23 the most challenging. Option A was a very common wrong answer for 23. Both stronger and weaker candidates were tempted in large numbers by 24D, 26A and 29D. Providing students with a wide variety of business texts will expose them to such fixed lexis.

**Part 5**

Candidates found this part the most challenging on the paper. A minority of candidates answered correctly for items 31, 33, 35, 36 and 37. In Part 5, while some questions operate on a phrase basis (*'on equal terms'*, *'accounts for'*, items 37 and 33), others require candidates to look at much longer bits of text in order to get the answer. Examples of this type are item 36 – we need to read forward to the word 'were' at the end of the following line to find the main verb of the sentence – and item 38, where the gapped word refers back to 'So efficient' at the very start of the sentence. Indeed, from the beginning of this piece, candidates needed to be aware of the line of argument as it developed. For the first question a considerable number of candidates put 'besides', but a careful reading clearly indicates a contrast between the *'little influence'* the company has and its *'operational excellence'*. In other words, these candidates correctly identified the need for a linking word, but did not spot the sense of contrast – the answer is 'despite'. When preparing for the paper, students might find it useful to summarise paragraphs or bits of text, working on the ability to follow the line of argument.

**Part 6**

Overall candidates found this part of the paper quite challenging, in particular Questions 41, 45, 49 and 50. Item 41 was testing recognition of the phrase 'to the best of one's ability'. Item 45 was a correct line, but a considerable number of candidates put 'will' as an extra word. The word 'will' *can* be omitted, but it is not *wrong*. Candidates should be careful when this situation arises, and remember that an extra word must actually be wrong grammatically or according to the meaning of the text. Candidates performed best on Question 46.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

In general terms, candidates should be encouraged to read as widely as possible across a broad range of text types and sources so that they become familiar with the type of texts which might appear in the paper. This range covers a spectrum of material from that which is 'strictly business' and aimed purely at a 'business' audience (e.g. articles from trade journals and magazines for professionals, extracts from the business sections or supplements of newspapers, company literature, such as annual reports, etc.) to material of more 'general interest' that focuses on business but is equally accessible to people not yet directly involved in business (e.g. 'popular' business books, such as those giving advice, interviews with well-known or successful business people, etc.).

Although the texts used are of a business nature, the questions set will not specifically target what could be considered specialist or technical vocabulary or jargon (although deduction of the meaning of such language from the context may be required). This is to ensure that candidates who do not possess specialist knowledge, or experience within a particular field, are not at a disadvantage.

It is also important for candidates to realise that the Reading Paper encompasses what in other examinations would be both the Reading Paper (Parts 1–3) and the Use of English Paper (Parts 4–6). Preparation for Parts 1–3 should therefore focus on the skills associated with reading comprehension (e.g. the understanding and interpretation of often complex detail in long texts), while preparation for Parts 4–6 should focus on grammar and vocabulary at an advanced level, including that which would be appropriate for any advanced general English examination.

**Part 1**

The task focuses on matching a series of statements, or 'prompts', with specific information given in five short texts or extracts. Candidates should be aware that each statement paraphrases target language in one of the texts or extracts, and correct answers do not depend on simple 'word-spotting', i.e. finding the same word in a question and a text or extract. The questions are framed in such a way that more than one of the texts or extracts may mention something related to the 'prompt' and therefore careful reading is required to ascertain which of them really matches the 'prompt'.

**Part 2**

The focus is on text structure, both overall and intersentential. Candidates need to appreciate that there are two key issues for identifying the correct option to fill a given gap: firstly, the need for the missing sentence to fit and make sense within the text; secondly, it needs to fit grammatically in terms of pronouns, verb forms, linking words and phrases, etc. The task is designed so that several options may appear to fit into a gap, however, only one option will satisfy both of the criteria just listed. It is important to realise that if one answer is incorrect, this can have a knock-on effect, so that if candidates suspect one answer is wrong, they may need to change others as a result.

**Part 3**

This task focuses on very close reading for detailed comprehension, with the questions following the order of information in the text. The exception is 'global' questions, which focus on the text as a whole and which, if they appear, are always the last question. Questions may target specific information, attitudes and opinions, complex and/or subtle points, as well as global issues such as the main point or purpose of the text. When answering multiple-choice questions, it is important to note that, although one or more of the options given may be true according to the text, only one of them will correctly answer the question that has been asked.

**Part 4**

The focus here is on vocabulary, both at single-word and phrase level, and candidates will need to have built up a wide knowledge of both general and business vocabulary, including collocations and phrasal verbs. Some questions specifically target 'business vocabulary', others more general vocabulary, but tested within a business context. Here, as in Part 5, it is also important that candidates read the text both immediately before and after gaps, to make sure that the answer they give makes sense in the context.

**Part 5**

This task focuses primarily on grammatical structure, with some questions testing lexical and lexico-grammatical phrases. Candidates will need to have a good command of general English structure at an advanced level and to have practised it within business contexts. It is also essential that candidates check that they have spelt their answers correctly, as marks can be lost for misspelling.

**Part 6**

The focus here is on proof-reading and editing skills, and again candidates will need knowledge of grammatical structure and lexical and lexico-grammatical phrases at an advanced level to identify the errors or know when a line is correct. Lines may contain words which, although not absolutely necessary, are not actually incorrect, and therefore these words should not be identified as errors. When identifying errors it may be necessary to refer to preceding or succeeding lines, since an error may only become apparent when the whole sentence containing it has been read. This is particularly true of occasions when the incorrect word is the first word in a sentence. When identifying correct lines, candidates should be advised that they must write 'CORRECT' on the answer sheet, as a blank space will be marked as incorrect.

- **Preparing for BEC Higher Reading (a summary)**

**Candidates should**

- read the rubrics for each part carefully. This may save time as they can give information about the overall context for the text.
- make sure they understand precisely how to record their answers and that they complete the answer sheet correctly.
- read through the whole of the texts for Parts 1–3 before attempting the questions. If they start answering questions too hastily by selecting the first options that look possible superficially, they may later discover that they were wrong and waste time doing the questions all over again.
- make sure that the answers for Part 1 are justified in terms of genuine paraphrases in the texts or extracts, equivalent to the statements, and are not based on a purely superficial resemblance, such as simple 'word-spotting'.
- make sure in Part 2 that each sentence chosen to fit into each gap fits both grammatically and in terms of the meaning of the text both before and after the gap.
- remember that if they realise they have chosen an incorrect option for one of the gaps in Part 2, this may well affect other answers they have given.
- read the whole of each sentence in Part 6 before deciding whether a line is correct or identifying an error in it; this is likely to involve reading the next line or previous lines.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- select an answer for Part 1 simply because the same word or words are in one part of the text and in the question. This kind of 'word spotting' is very unlikely to lead to the correct answer.
- choose an option for Part 3 which, although true, does not actually answer the question that has been set.
- forget that questions in Part 3 follow the order of the text and that time can be wasted by looking all over the text for the answer to a particular question (unless the question is a 'global' one, in which case it will be the final question).
- answer questions in Parts 4 and 5 without reading the text around the gaps to establish the context.
- leave blanks for correct lines in Part 6 or identify as errors words which are unnecessary but not incorrect.

## BEC HIGHER WRITING

| PART | Functions/Communicative Task | Input | Response | Register |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | e.g. describing or comparing figures from graphic input, making inferences | Rubric and graphic input | Short report (medium may be memo or email) (120 – 140 words) | Neutral/ formal |
| 2 | **Report:** describing, summarising<br>**Correspondence:** e.g. explaining, apologising, reassuring, complaining<br>**Proposal:** describing, summarising, recommending, persuading | Rubric, possibly supplemented by brief input text e.g. notice, advert | **Candidates choose from** report (medium may be memo or email) or proposal (medium may be memo or email) or business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or email) (200 – 250 words) | Neutral/ formal |

For BEC Higher, candidates are required to produce two pieces of business writing. The questions supply candidates with sufficient information to enable them to use an appropriate style and register, and address all the content points.

Both Part 1 and Part 2 tasks are compulsory. Part 1 requires candidates to produce a short report of between 120 and 140 words based on graphic information. In Part 2, candidates are asked to produce an extended piece of business writing of between 200 and 250 words. Candidates choose from three options: a report, a proposal or a piece of business correspondence.

Each Writing task is marked by a trained examiner. Examiners mark in teams, monitored by Team Leaders. Each marking session is led by a Principal Examiner. Examiners refer to a General Mark Scheme which provides detailed descriptions of performance at each of five levels of proficiency, with scores converted to provide a mark out of 10 for Part 1 and out of 20 for Part 2 (a total of 30 marks, i.e. 25% of the candidate's overall score). In addition to this, a Task-specific Mark Scheme for each question gives guidance on the features an answer should contain.

In Part 1, the assessment focus is on content, effective organisation of input, appropriacy to the intended audience, accuracy and conciseness. In Part 2, the focus is mainly on content, style/register and, because the task is longer than Part 1, candidates have more scope to demonstrate a range of structure and vocabulary.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

The Part 1 task required candidates to write a short report comparing the number of full-time employees with the number of part-time and contract employees in a software design company over a four-year period, with the information being presented graphically. For Part 2, candidates had to write either a report on a visit to one of a company's retail outlets, a letter to a prospective new distribution company, or a proposal considering the impact of relocating on a company and its staff.

**Part 1**

The graphic input was a graph with three variables, concerning the number of employees in a software design company over a four-year period; it gave the number of permanent full-time, permanent part-time and temporary contract employees in hundreds. The question required candidates to compare the numbers of these three categories of employees.

Some candidates organised their answers in terms of employee category and some described and compared the data year by year; both approaches were acceptable. Stronger candidates were able to compare the three categories concisely, linking their comments with appropriate expressions and organising their reports well into clear paragraphs.

Many candidates, however, described the changes in temporary contract employees in very broad terms and did not, for example, refer to the downward movement in the numbers in 2005. This resulted in the omission of a content point and these answers were penalised. Many candidates used the word 'fluctuation' loosely and often incorrectly ('a lot more fluctuations', 'fluctuating trends') and some inappropriately general expressions were used ('increased a lot') rather than more precise language. There was evidence that candidates had learnt lexis which could be used to describe movements in graphs (e.g. 'outperformed'), but which was not appropriate for this question.

Candidates need to be reminded that all the information in the graph needs to be included and the data should be read carefully so that the report is complete and accurate. It is not necessary to provide explanations in the report for the changes in data in the graph.

**Part 2**

Candidate performance in Part 2 of this paper was generally quite good in terms of language range. However, some candidates did not address certain content points carefully enough and some omitted content points and were penalised.

**Question 2**

This question asked for a report on a visit the candidate made to one of their company's retail outlets. Candidates had to describe the store briefly, assess the performance and attitude of the staff and suggest a way of improving the store.

This was the most popular question in Part 2 and generally was answered competently by most candidates. Many organised their reports clearly with headings and paragraphs and wrote in a neutral and business-like tone, suitable for a report to a line manager.

Stronger candidates addressed the first content point well by describing the store appropriately with, for example, reference to staff numbers, current product range, sales and current and prospective customer numbers. However, some candidates described the location of the store, which was inappropriate for this internal company report. The second and third content points were generally developed well, with comments including observations on staff morale and behaviour towards customers linked to suggestions for training to improve staff motivation and customer service. Such linking of points produced good cohesive answers.

**Question 3**

This question was a letter to a possible new distribution company following problems with the current transport company used by the candidate's company. Candidates had to outline what their company did, describe its transport requirements, explain how these transport requirements were likely to change in the next few years and give details of the information needed from the prospective new distribution company.

Stronger candidates were able to deal with all four content points in a balanced way, introducing their company concisely and explaining the importance to customers of reliable deliveries of products. Changing requirements included the company's expansion plans and increased demand for their products; the information required to cover the fourth content point was usually business references and details of the distribution company's capacity. Such answers demonstrated a good range of expression and a satisfactory grasp of cohesive features.

Some candidates developed the first two content points more fully than points three and four; some omitted point three and were penalised. Candidates need to plan their answers carefully and ensure that each content point is developed appropriately so that a good range of structure and lexis is used.

**Question 4**

This question was a proposal to the board of the candidate's company concerning the possible relocation of the company. Candidates were asked to explain why they thought the company should relocate, give a brief description of the premises required, and assess the possible impact of the move on staff and on the company's business.

Again, stronger candidates were able to produce balanced answers, developing each content point well. A good range of lexis was used to describe premises, ways of persuading staff to accept the move and the opportunities this offered for the company. Some candidates, however, dealt with the second content point inappropriately by describing the location rather than the 'type of premises' and were penalised. Candidates need to be reminded to read the question very carefully and refer to it while writing their answer.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

In general, the message for candidates is to read each question carefully and carry out exactly the task required. Candidates should check the number of content points that each question has, and should check whether or not there is a second part to a bullet point, particularly in Part 2 tasks. They should then address each of these points.

One way to help candidates focus on this issue is to train them to write a brief plan before starting on their answer. This would also help many candidates with the organisation of their writing. This is important as better organisation and paragraphing could possibly result in a better mark for a significant number of candidates. Candidates should also remember that they should leave a clear line between paragraphs, or clearly indent the first word of a new paragraph. Good clear paragraphing is essential if a candidate is to do well in Part 2. Candidates should also ensure they indicate the number of the question attempted in Part 2 in the box at the top of the page.

In the examination itself, there is insufficient time to write out more than one draft and candidates should be discouraged from doing this. Some candidates write out a full rough draft and then rewrite it more neatly, or write it in pencil and then go over it in ink. This is a significant waste of time. A better strategy is to use any extra time available to check for errors such as verb tenses, countable/uncountable nouns, singular/plural agreements, part of speech errors (e.g. *sell* and *sale*) and spelling. Too many candidates also spend time counting words and writing the number at the end of each line, or at the end of each paragraph. Candidates should already be aware of how long a standard answer is and should not need to count words; time spent doing this could be better spent planning and/or editing the answer.

In preparation for the examination, it is often very instructive for candidates to work on a second draft of a homework answer. In this way, the teacher, or fellow students, can make useful suggestions regarding organisation, language and content. The second draft can then be compared with the first, which is not only instructive regarding weaknesses, but also builds confidence.

Training in time management and timed practice using past papers would be helpful. It should be emphasised to candidates that Part 2 carries twice as many marks as Part 1 and should therefore be allocated about twice as much time. Candidates should also be made aware that the word count for Part 1 is 120–140 words and for Part 2 is 200–250 words. Furthermore, candidates should be aware that writing more than the required number of words is unlikely to result in a higher mark, as generally the extra text contains material which is irrelevant to the task.

**Part 1**

This is an exercise in **concise** writing and it is therefore important for candidates to think about what information to include before starting to write. Class time could usefully be spent in paired or small group discussion of past questions and other examples of graphical data. Candidates might be asked to identify:

- exactly what variables are represented (e.g. sales in £m/units in millions) especially if there is more than one graphic image
- the correct units and order of magnitude for these figures
- the main purpose of the question or graphic (e.g. to compare two sets of data)
- the main trends or other features represented
- which figures should be included in an answer.

Practice in writing suitable introductory and closing sentences is essential, especially with the aim of making candidates aware that they are not to draw conclusions from the data, or try to interpret the data in any way.

Exercises in editing and summarising would develop the ability to write concisely. Students could usefully work on second drafts of their own or one another's writing to eliminate unnecessary repetition. Work on pronouns, including relatives, and other cohesive devices would be helpful. It is also essential that candidates use the correct tense (frequently past tense) to describe the information and that the tense they use remains constant (see below).

Other areas of language that tend to cause problems in this question and might therefore be highlighted in class include verb tenses, especially the present perfect which is often used incorrectly, countable versus uncountable nouns and articles, especially for candidates whose first language does not use them. Also, with regard to verb tenses, many candidates jump between present and past when describing the data. The present tense can be used to describe data, even if the data is from a past time, but this can be linguistically difficult to do well. Candidates would be well advised to use the past tense when describing data which refer to a past time.

Candidates should be encouraged to include figures in their answers, as appropriate, but should be made aware that these need to be accurate: this is important because of the effect on the target reader of incorrect information. However, candidates should also be aware that if there is a significant amount of graphic input, then it is unlikely that all figures need to be included in the answer. The target reader would only require figures for trends or for the most important information. A single bar chart, on the other hand, is likely to contain a quantity of information such that it can all be included in the report. Candidates should also be taught the correct way to write numerical data such as currency, time and dates, how commas and points are used in numbers in English and which abbreviations are commonly used.

The language of graphs is clearly essential to this question and spending time on the necessary structures and vocabulary is recommended, although candidates should try to use set phrases selectively and only when they really apply to the data (e.g. not 'rocketed' if in fact the increase was gradual). In addition, it is possible that too much emphasis is being given to teaching language used for describing line graphs and not enough to teaching language required for other types of graphic images. Language used for line graphs is not necessarily appropriate for other types of graphic.

A range of vocabulary is desirable, but not at the expense of accuracy; students should be made aware, for example, that 'sales', 'turnover' and 'profit' are not interchangeable. Care should also be taken not to confuse different lines and/or graphs when describing data. A useful technique might be to colour code the graphs and key on the question paper at the planning stage.

Many candidates write far more than the required number of words for this task. Some candidates write almost as many words for Part 1 as they do for Part 2. Candidates should be made aware that they should not attempt to interpret or analyse the data in Part 1 unless specifically asked to do so. The rubric generally only asks for description and/or comparison of the graphic image or a summary of it. If candidates go beyond the information that is given and that they are required to focus on entirely in their answers, they may produce irrelevant answers or answers that do not completely make sense, even if they have fully understood the input. This will naturally have an unnecessarily adverse effect on their scores. In addition, candidates who waste valuable time in this way leave themselves with less time for Part 2.

Answers to Part 1 should not be written as a speech. Candidates are asked to write a *'short report'*, not a speech. Register and format are important. For example, if candidates write *'let's now look at'*, and *'as you can see from'*, then this type of language is inappropriate for a written report.

**Part 2**

In contrast to Part 1, this is a longer and more loosely defined piece of writing. It is therefore an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate a wide range of structure and vocabulary.

Candidates should read all of the questions before they begin to write. Question 2 is often the most popular question. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is the best option for many candidates. Proposals are not more difficult than reports and, indeed, they share some characteristics (see below). The topic should be an important consideration when deciding which question to answer, since candidates need to be sure they have a good enough range of vocabulary which will allow them to develop a certain topic.

Candidates should be made aware that they are writing for a target audience (reader). This reader will affect how they write and what they write. In addition, proposals, reports and letters are not the same. Format, aim of the task, target reader, relevant content detail and probably verb tense will all be affected by output genre. It is essential that candidates are made aware of this (see below).

The conventions of report and letter formats should be taught; proposals have the same format as reports. In the examination, candidates are instructed not to include addresses in letters, but they should include correct opening and closing formulae and their signature, name and position. Reports and proposals should also include the name and position of the writer as well as organising devices such as title and sub-headings. Candidates should be trained to choose appropriate headings for each particular task – rephrasing of a bullet point will often provide a candidate with a suitable heading. It should be pointed out that standard formats such as 'introduction', 'findings', 'conclusion', and 'recommendations' do not fit every situation.

Work can be done in class on organisation and layout. For example, candidates could be given an unparagraphed piece of text, where all the necessary information is included, though not in a logical order. They would then have to reorganise the information into a logical order, divided into meaningful sections.

The best answers contain detailed and specific information and it is therefore a good idea for candidates to learn how to brainstorm their ideas in class in order to generate suitable content.

Particular attention should be paid to the target reader and to what knowledge can be assumed and what should be included, e.g. there is no need to tell your boss 'I work for a multinational company'. However, if the report/proposal is departmental specific it is necessary to indicate which department your response is for.

Candidates should be trained to address all the bullet points, as failure to address one bullet point will result in the candidate being penalised. Candidates should also consider the balance of their answers; the points do not necessarily require equal amounts of writing and it is important to notice if, for example, the question asks for a **brief** description of something. Candidates should also check if any of the bullets in the question have two parts.

Bullet points and numbering are useful devices as they may help with organisation and clarity, and students should be taught to use them correctly, i.e. each sentence or phrase in a list should have the same kind of grammatical structure. These devices should, however, be used with restraint, especially in the context of this examination, since excessive use, often including poorly formulated note form, can prevent the demonstration of linguistic range.

It is important for candidates to be made aware of register and to use it consistently, as appropriate. Exposure to authentic texts would help with this. Candidates could be asked to identify the target reader, the register and specific words or phrases which define it. Comparison of formal expressions with their informal counterparts is also useful.

Other areas of language that sometimes cause problems with this question include linking words and phrases, sentence structure, verb patterns and prepositions. Linking words and phrases are a particular problem as students learn such words and thus feel the need to use them. However, candidates tend to overuse these words and frequently use them inaccurately.

- **Preparing for BEC Higher Writing (a summary)**

**Candidates should**

- read the question thoroughly and underline important parts.
- make a brief plan for each answer.
- think about the target reader and format, especially in Part 2.
- read all of the questions in Part 2 before starting to write.
- write in paragraphs, possibly including headings if relevant.
- write in full (grammatically correct) sentences and use a range of structures to avoid repetition.
- use a range of vocabulary, even if unsure of the correct spelling.
- check writing, e.g. for verb tenses, plural forms and word order in sentences.
- spend more time on Part 2 than on Part 1.
- include figures in Part 1, but make sure they are correct.
- ensure that units and order of magnitude are correct when used in Part 1.
- write the number of the question answered in Part 2.
- include the name and position of the writer in a report or proposal.
- include opening and closing formulae, name and position in a letter.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- mix formal and informal language.
- discuss the data in Part 1, only a description is required.
- write addresses for a letter, as they are not required.
- worry if they run slightly over the word limit.
- count the number of words written.

## BEC HIGHER LISTENING

| PART | Main Skill Focus | Input | Response | Number of questions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Listening for and noting specific information | Informational monologue | Gap-filling requiring limited written responses (i.e. no more than 3 words) | 12 |
| 2 | Listening to identify topic, context, function, speaker's opinion, etc. | 5 short monologues linked by theme or topic, from 5 different speakers | Multiple matching | 10 |
| 3 | Listening for gist, specific information, attitudes, etc. | Conversation/interview/discussion between 2 or more people | 3-option multiple choice | 8 |

The Listening Paper is designed to test a range of listening skills. The test lasts approximately 40 minutes and contains 30 questions, with one mark awarded for each correct answer. There are three parts to the test and a range of text and task types is represented. All parts of the recording are heard twice. All instructions, rubrics and pauses are recorded on to the CD, as is the ten minutes transfer time at the end of the test.

Candidates write their answers on the question paper. In Part 1 of the test, they are required to write a word or short phrase (of up to three words) in response to the written prompt. In Parts 2 and 3, they must choose the correct answer from those provided: A, B, C, etc. At the end of the test, candidates have ten minutes to transfer their answers on to the separate answer sheet.

Part 1 is a sentence completion, gap-filling or note-taking task. Candidates have to supply only the key words of the answer, which will not be more than three words per item. The spoken text lasts about two to three minutes and is a monologue, focusing on a series of identifiable facts or pieces of concrete information. In Part 1, topics might involve instructions, the programme for an event or meeting of some kind, details of the organisation of an event or information about company development or background. There are twelve items, which are distributed evenly throughout the text, so that candidates have time to record their answers. Items of information are tested in the same order in which the information occurs in the text. Correct spelling of answer words is expected.

Part 2 is a matching task based on five short extracts linked by theme or topic and spoken by five different speakers in monologue form. In total, the texts last about three to four minutes. There are two tasks for each of the five extracts. These tasks relate to the content and purpose of the extracts and candidates are asked to do any combination of the following: identify speakers, interpret context, recognise the function of what was said, identify the topic, understand specific information, identify a speaker's opinions or feelings. The extracts are heard twice and candidates must attempt both tasks during this time. It is for candidates to decide if they choose to do the first task the first time they listen to the text, and the second task the second time, or whether to deal with the two tasks for each extract together.

Part 3 consists of a discussion or interview, usually with two speakers, but extracts from more than two speakers are sometimes featured. There are eight, three-option multiple-choice items. The text relates to a topic of interest or concern in the world of work.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

**Part 1**

Candidates generally found Part 1 straightforward. There was only one question which they found challenging. For Question 9 the answer was *'data transmission'* (*'data transmissions'* was also accepted). A significant number of candidates gave *'growth'* as the answer, probably because this word was heard immediately before *'revenues'* in the recording (which appears directly after the answer in Question 9). It should be noted that *'growth'* means the same as *'increase'* which was already provided on the question paper. This error indicates that candidates had not properly processed the full prompt. It emphasises the need for them to read through answers at the end to check whether the word they have written fits in the gap without repetition.

**Part 2**

Candidates generally found Part 2 more demanding than Parts 1 and 3. Two questions in particular were challenging: Questions 15 and 20, both relating to Speaker Three. It should be noted that the answers here were in reverse order i.e. the answer for Task Two occurred before the answer for Task One. Candidates should listen carefully for phrases/sentences which indicate which task – One or Two – is being addressed at a particular stage in the speech.

For Question 15, candidates were required to identify the speaker's reason for choosing to attend the workshop. The key was H *'to examine evidence of changing trends'* which refers to the following part of the recording: *'…I signed up for the workshop because I knew we needed to find out more concrete facts about how career patterns are shifting…'* Many candidates chose Option E *'to manage information more effectively'*. They were probably picking up on the phrase *'to get no more information…'* but this relates to the outside consultants who would have done the work if the speaker had not attended the workshop. Other candidates chose Option F *'to explore issues in managing recruitment'* and were probably picking up on *'to investigate our staff's expectations'* but this refers to existing staff not to new employees i.e. issues of recruitment.

For Question 20, candidates had to identify the outcome of attending the workshop. The key was A *'A report was produced for senior staff'* which refers to the following part of the recording *'present it all in writing to the leadership team'*. A substantial number of candidates chose Option F *'Outside advice was sought'* picking up on the phrase *'calling in outside consultants'* but this described what would have been done if the speaker had not attended the workshop.

**Part 3**

Candidates generally performed well on this part of the test, but two questions proved slightly more challenging than the others. For Question 28 – which suggestion in the book Rachel disagreed with – the key was Option C *'take a particular test to identify a suitable career'*. This relates to the following part of the recording: *'I did think the author made an error of judgement in reproducing the* ***Strong Interest Inventory*** *for readers to try out. That was the test developed at Stanford in the 1920s.'* Many candidates chose Option B *'choose a field that matches their leisure activities'.* They were picking up on a later piece of text *'What I call the magazine test is infinitely simpler…you think what magazine you're most likely to buy and find a job in that field'*. These candidates failed to realise that this was the part Rachel agreed with rather than disagreed with which is what the question required. This error reinforces the need to process the meaning of the question, not simply to try to match individual words on the question paper with what they hear in the recording.

Question 29 – Rachel's opinion of the cost of the book – was also challenging. The answer was C *'It compares favourably to other books of this kind'* which refers to this part of the recording: *'it isn't so dear as to price students out of the market completely…unlike a lot of books of this type, it doesn't try to command a higher price by purporting to be an academic volume.'* Many candidates chose Option A *'it would be beyond the budget of any business student'* picking up on: *'it's not paltry if you're a student'*. However this is immediately followed by the explicit statement that the price would <u>not</u> prevent students from buying it. Some chose Option B *'it will discourage readers looking for an academic text'*, picking up on the mention of an *'academic volume'* but the text implies it is cheaper than most 'academic' works which *'try to command a higher price'*.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

**Part 1**

In this task, it is important that candidates establish the best approach so as not to get 'lost' while hearing the recording. Crucially, candidates should be discouraged from lingering on questions they find difficult, as this may well prevent them from answering other questions they may find more straightforward. The second listening provides an opportunity to focus on questions they cannot answer first time round.

Candidates should be urged to use the 45 seconds they are given between the reading of the rubric and the start of the piece to read through the questions. This will help them anticipate what kind of information will be heard and what type of answer will be required, taking into account the words either side of the gaps.

Candidates need to be aware that they are required to write only those words or phrases they actually hear on the recording. Rephrasing is not expected and may prove unwise as candidates who have in fact understood perfectly can end up writing answers which are marked as incorrect.

As all questions paraphrase rather than repeat what is heard on the recording, this may result in minor re-ordering, and for such questions, the second listening is likely to be crucial. Candidates should also be urged to use the 20 seconds they are given after the second listening as well as the ten minutes they are given at the end of the Paper to check their answers. Candidates should be encouraged to read the whole prompt carefully and not give answers which repeat words (or synonyms of words) already given in the prompt.

Spelling has to be correct (although on occasions, some limited variations may be acceptable). US spelling conventions are accepted.

**Part 2**

This part involves two matching tasks relating to five separate monologues, each by different speakers – there are therefore two questions on what each speaker says. Candidates should be encouraged to decide on the approach they are most comfortable with. They may either attempt both tasks on the first listening, using the second listening to check, amend or confirm their answers; alternatively, they may choose to do the first task on the first listening and the second task on the second listening.

Candidates should be urged to read the rubrics and headings carefully, as these are there to tell them briefly and clearly what each task will involve and what all five of the speakers are talking about. The headings are intended to enable candidates to see at a glance what each task will focus on. If candidates have read the rubrics and headings carefully, they will be able to anticipate what the speakers are going to say.

In the 30-second period before the start of the extracts, candidates should also read through the options for both tasks as this will enable them to see what areas are being tested in each. In addition, candidates should be aware that sometimes the information on the recording may not appear in the same order as the questions on the paper – it depends upon the speaker in question. For example, in the May 2008 test, the answer to Question 20 occurred before the answer to Question 15 in Speaker Three's piece. When checking answers, candidates should be aware that changing one answer which they have realised is incorrect may well have a knock-on effect on other answers that they have given. Hence, they may also need to be changed.

Candidates should be prepared to encounter a variety of test focuses in the tasks, i.e. questions relate to who the speakers are, what opinions or advice they give, their attitudes and feelings, etc.

**Part 3**

Candidates should be prepared to deal with fairly complex information in this part. Hence, in any given question it is unwise to choose the first option that seems plausible, as the meaning of what is said may require some more considered interpretation.

Candidates should be urged to use the 45 seconds they are given between the reading of the rubric and the start of the piece to read through the questions, as this will enable them to acquaint themselves with the aspects that they are going to be tested on. When listening to the text, they will then be able to focus precisely on those aspects.

They should also be aware that for Part 3 the questions will follow the order of what is said in the piece. Again, if they are unable to answer a particular question, they should not spend too long on it so that they then miss the information required to answer the next question. The second listening can be used for answering questions which could not be answered the first time, as well as for checking answers that candidates are more confident about.

It is important that candidates realise that, in multiple-choice questions, more than one option may be true according to what is said, but only one option correctly answers the question that has been asked.

Candidates should be prepared to encounter a variety of focuses in the questions for this part, including information or advice given, the feelings expressed, etc.

- **Preparing for BEC Higher Listening (a summary)**

**Candidates should**

- use the time allowed to read the questions carefully before they hear each piece. This will help them to focus on precisely what is being tested.
- use the second listening to check, confirm or amend answers they gave during the first listening (remember that amending an answer in Part 2 may affect other answers).
- remember that incorrect spelling in Part 1 is penalised.
- pay careful attention to the rubrics (and headings in Part 2), as this will prevent them from wasting time trying to find out what the pieces are about while listening to them.
- make sure they concentrate on an in-depth understanding of what is said in Parts 2 and 3, rather than a more superficial one.
- make sure that they have correctly transferred their answers to the answer sheet during the ten minutes allowed for this.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- spend too much time thinking about a question they are having difficulty answering, as this may prevent them from answering subsequent questions which may be easier for them.
- attempt to rephrase what they hear in Part 1, as this is not necessary.
- forget to pay attention to anything that appears after the gap in Part 1 questions.
- in Part 1, repeat in their answers words that already appear in the prompt.
- assume, in Part 2, that points relevant for Task One will always be supplied before points relating to Task Two.
- forget that in Part 3, an option that is true according to what is said, may not answer the question that has been asked.

## BEC HIGHER SPEAKING

| PART | Format/Content | Time | Interaction Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Conversation between the interlocutor and each candidate.<br>Giving personal information and expressing opinions. | About 3 minutes | The interlocutor encourages the candidates to give information about themselves and to express personal opinions. |
| 2 | A 'mini-presentation' by each candidate on a business theme.<br>Organising a larger unit of discourse; giving information and expressing and justifying opinions. | About 6 minutes | The candidates are given prompts which generate a short talk on a business-related topic. |
| 3 | Two-way conversation between candidates followed by further prompting from the interlocutor.<br>Expressing and justifying opinions, speculating, comparing and contrasting, agreeing and disagreeing, etc. | About 7 minutes | The candidates are presented with a prompt to initiate a discussion on a business-related topic. The interlocutor extends the discussion with prompts on related topics. |

The BEC Higher Speaking test is conducted with pairs of candidates by two Oral Examiners: an Interlocutor and an Assessor. The test takes approximately 16 minutes and is divided into three parts.

In Part 1 of the test, candidates are being assessed on their ability to provide concise information on a number of personal or work-related subjects, involving functions such as giving opinions.

In Part 2, each candidate is given a choice of three topics and has one minute to prepare an individual presentation lasting approximately one minute. Candidates should approach the task as if giving a presentation in a business environment. After each candidate has spoken, their partner asks a question about what has been said. In Part 2, candidates are being tested on their ability to organise a talk using language accurately and appropriately.

Part 3 is a two-way collaborative task based on a written prompt which is handed to both candidates, and which they have 30 seconds to consider. Candidates then discuss the topic for about three minutes and are then asked questions related to the main theme. In Part 3, candidates are being tested on their ability to interact appropriately using appropriate functional language and strategies.

- **Assessment**

The assessor awards marks to each candidate for performance throughout the test according to four analytical criteria (Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse Management, Pronunciation and Interactive Communication). The interlocutor awards marks according to a global achievement scale, which assesses the candidate's overall effectiveness in tackling the tasks. Mark sheets are completed by the examiners and computer scanned. The Speaking paper is out of a total of 30 marks (25% of the candidate's overall score).

Candidates are assessed on their own performance according to the established criteria, and are not assessed in relation to each other. Candidates are not penalised if they have difficulty understanding their partner.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Candidates' performance in May 2008 was consistent with that of May 2007. Feedback from oral examiners has been generally positive. Candidates who have not met each other before the Speaking test do not need to feel concerned as evidence suggests that this does not affect performance.

**Part 1**

This part of the test gives the examiners their first impression of the candidates and it is therefore important that candidates speak about themselves and their work or studies with appropriate detail, using their own experiences as a basis for extended contributions. Candidates are advised not to rehearse answers to questions that they think may be asked, as this often leads to inappropriate responses.

**Part 2**

In this part of the test, candidates are expected to produce an extended piece of discourse in the form of a mini-presentation. Candidates should use the preparation time allowed to organise their thoughts and produce a structured, connected talk, which will be reflected in the score for Discourse Management. It is best for candidates to make brief notes to help them follow the structure of their talk, rather than trying to write down exactly what they will say.

Candidates should follow instructions to listen carefully to their partner's talk and ask a question afterwards.

**Part 3**

The collaborative task gives both candidates the opportunity to interact and co-operate with each other. Candidates who perform well do not merely agree with their partner, but express their own views and opinions and develop their partner's comments. Candidates are expected to negotiate and should not feel concerned if they do not agree. However, strong disagreement can undermine a partner's confidence and an over-assertive candidate may lose marks.

Candidates should make full use of the time available, starting their discussion when they have absorbed the information fully, and finishing only when the examiner asks them to. They should not feel concerned when they are asked to stop, as this will simply mean that they have talked for the allotted time.

After the discussion activity, the follow-on questions provide a further opportunity for candidates to express their point of view. This also provides an opportunity for examiners to redress any imbalances in turn-taking that may have occurred earlier in Part 3. It is therefore vital that candidates offer more than a minimal response and take the opportunity to initiate discussion, as well as to answer the interlocutor's questions.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Candidates should be aware that examiners can only base their assessments on what they hear and see. They should therefore take a full and active role in the test, and speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard. Candidates who fail to take up the opportunity to show what they are capable of will undoubtedly under-perform.

Candidates should be aware that long silences and pauses will diminish their opportunity to do well. Even if candidates have few ideas, they should be prepared to comment on what the examiner has asked them, and not adopt a role that is too passive.

Candidates should be advised not to over-rehearse the interview part of the test with their partner before taking the exam, as this can lead to inappropriate answers being given. Examiners are looking for genuine interaction.

Candidates should not feel disadvantaged because they cannot remember or do not know an occasional word. Credit is given for paraphrasing and substituting vocabulary, especially if it is communicatively effective.

Students should be encouraged in class to practise a variety of paired or group activities. Familiarity with the Speaking test format usually helps candidates give a more effective performance and can also help with nervousness. A Speaking Test Video for all BEC levels is available to help with this. However, there is no substitute for a genuine interest in the language and in communication with others.

Candidates should be aware that attempts to dominate their partner will be penalised. Candidates should show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking and should respond appropriately to each other's utterances, as well as inviting opinions from others. They should avoid cutting across or interrupting impolitely what their partner is saying.

The best preparation for the discussion activity is for candidates to practise taking part in discussions in small groups, so that all candidates have the opportunity to participate. Candidates with a quieter disposition should be encouraged to develop strategies to ensure that they are able to take their turn. Suitable thematic areas for discussion can be found in many business coursebooks and there is a list of topic areas in the BEC Handbook.

- **Preparing for BEC Higher Speaking (a summary)**

**Candidates should**

- familiarise themselves with the form, function and procedures for all parts of the test.
- take every opportunity to practise their English in groups and pairs, both inside and outside the classroom before the test, particularly in a business environment, if possible.
- take opportunities to show what they are capable of and try to produce an extended sample of language for the examiner to assess.
- listen carefully to instructions and questions asked throughout the test and focus their answers appropriately.
- ask for repetition of instructions if they are unclear about what to do.
- show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking and respond appropriately to their partner's utterances.
- try to avoid long silences and frequent pauses.
- be prepared to initiate discussion in Part 3, as well as to respond to what their partner has said.
- speak clearly and loudly enough for the examiners to hear.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- prepare long responses in advance, as it is unlikely that questions will be answered appropriately.
- try to give their views during their partner's long turn.
- try to dominate their partner or interrupt in an abrupt way.
- make frequent pauses and hesitations during the interaction or during their own turn.
- worry if they disagree with their partner. As long as they are polite and not overbearing, this is all part of interactive communication.
- worry about being interrupted by the examiner. For administrative reasons, it is important that tests do not overrun.

**FEEDBACK FORM**

**BEC Higher Examination Report – May 2008**

We are interested in hearing your views on how useful this report has been.

We would be most grateful if you could briefly answer the following questions and return a photocopy of this page to the following address:

University of Cambridge
ESOL Examinations
Reports Co-ordinator
1 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB1 2EU

1. Please describe your situation (e.g. EFL/ESOL teacher, Director of Studies, Examinations Officer, Centre Exams Manager).

2. Have you prepared candidates for BEC Higher? YES/NO

3. Do you plan to prepare candidates for BEC Higher in the future? YES/NO

4. How have you used this report (e.g. to provide feedback to other teachers, for examination practice, etc.)?

5. Which parts of this report did you find most useful?

6. Which parts are not so useful?

7. What extra information would you like to see included in this report?

8. (Optional) Your name ......................................................……………..…

   Centre .................……………………………………...........

Thank you.