

BEC

Preliminary

Examination Report

May 2005



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Business English Certificate Preliminary

Examination Report

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WEBSITE REFERENCE

This report can be accessed through the Cambridge ESOL website at:

www.CambridgeESOL.org

INTRODUCTION

This report provides a general view of how candidates performed overall and on each paper in the May 2005 session, and offers guidance on the preparation of candidates.

• **Candidature**

The May 2005 session was sat in 16 countries, with the largest entry being from China. The profile of the candidature in China was different in many respects from that in the rest of the world.

In China, 91% of candidates were between the ages of 17 and 25 and 8% between 26 and 40 years old, with 67% being female. Half of the candidates attended exam preparation classes; 36% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was for further study of English and 34% stated that it was to help in their job or career.

In countries other than China, 68% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 22% between 26 and 40 years old, with 46% being female. Exam preparation classes were attended by 92% of candidates. 67% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career; 21% said that it was for further study of English.

• **Grading**

Grading took place during June 2005, approximately five weeks after the examination was taken.

The four BEC Preliminary 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 Preliminary 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 3)
- comparison with statistics from previous years' examination performance and candidature.

Results are reported as two passing grades (Pass with Merit and Pass). The overall pass rate for the May 2005 examination was 47%. The pass rate in China was 36%, compared to 79% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 8% of candidates were awarded a 'Pass with merit' (3% in the case of China, and 23% 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 Preliminary:

- *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 10 weeks after each examination session, including Examination Papers 1–4, 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 Preliminary are now available (visit the website: http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teach/bec/bec_preliminary/). 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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Feedback on this report is very welcome and should be sent to the Reports Co-ordinator, Cambridge ESOL, at the above address. Please use the feedback form at the end of this report.

BEC PRELIMINARY READING

PART	Main Skill Focus	Input	Response	Number of questions
1	Reading – understanding short, real world notices, messages, etc.	Notices, messages, adverts, leaflets, etc.	Multiple choice	5
2	Reading – detailed comprehension of factual material; skimming and scanning skills	Notice, list, contents page, etc.	Matching	5
3	Reading – interpreting visual information	Graphs, charts, tables, etc. (The information may be presented in 8 separate graphics or in a composite graphic comprising up to 3 visuals.)	Matching	5
4	Reading for detailed factual information	Text (approx. 150–200 words): advert, business letter, product description, report, minutes, etc.	Right/Wrong/ Doesn't say	7
5	Reading for gist and specific information	Text (approx. 300–100 words): newspaper or magazine article, advert, report, leaflet, etc.	Multiple choice	6
6	Reading – grammatical accuracy and understanding of text structure	Text (approx. 125– 50 words): newspaper or magazine, article, advert, report, leaflet, etc.	Multiple choice cloze	12
7	Reading and information transfer	Short memos, letters, notices, adverts, etc.	Form-filling, note completion	5

The BEC Preliminary Reading Paper is based on seven texts, with 45 questions of varied types (multiple choice, multiple matching and note-taking). One point is awarded for each correct answer, and the total out of 45 is then weighted to 25% of the candidate's overall mark.

Candidates are required to transfer their answers onto 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 consists of five short texts, all of which are accompanied by a multiple-choice question containing three options. The difficulty of the task lies not in understanding the context, but in identifying or interpreting meaning.

Part 2 of the test is a matching task comprising one text and five questions, which are often descriptions of people's requirements. Candidates are required to match each question to an appropriate part of the text, labelled A–H. The testing focus is on vocabulary and meaning, using skimming and scanning skills.

The Part 3 task consists of eight graphs or charts (or one or more graphics with eight distinct elements) and five questions. Each question is a description of a particular graphic (or element of a particular graphic) and candidates are expected to match the questions to their corresponding graphs, which are labelled A–H.

The Part 4 task is a text accompanied by seven, three-option multiple-choice questions. Each question presents a statement and candidates need to decide whether the statements are A 'Right' or B 'Wrong' according to the text, or whether the information is not given in the text (C 'Doesn't say'). The questions will refer to factual information in the text, but candidates will be required to do some processing in order to answer the questions correctly.

Part 5 consists of a single text accompanied by six multiple-choice comprehension questions. Candidates are expected to employ more complex reading strategies in this task, including demonstrating the ability to extract relevant information, to read for gist and detail, to scan the text for specific information, and to understand the purpose of the writer and appreciate who the intended target audience is.

Part 6 is a cloze test in which candidates have to select the correct word from three multiple-choice options to complete the twelve gaps, the task has a predominantly grammatical focus.

In the last reading task, Part 7, candidates are given two short texts, for example a memo and an advertisement, and a form which they are required to complete based on this material. The form has five gaps, each of which should be completed with a number or short phrase. Candidates are tested on their ability to extract relevant information and transfer it accurately.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Part 1

Candidates generally completed the task well, with Question 4 proving to be the most challenging. Rather than the correct answer A, approximately equal numbers of candidates chose options B or C. These candidates failed to understand that *'use its information resources'* in A is a paraphrase for *'access to our management database'* in the text, and instead focused on the word *'trainee'* and chose B, or interpreted *'unlimited'* as *'anyone'*, and chose C. Candidates also experienced some difficulty with Question 2, where a significant number were drawn to option C rather than A, and in Question 3, many candidates chose C instead of the correct key, B. In both these cases, the options which attracted the weaker candidates were those which included the most items of vocabulary from the text: in Question 2, C was the only option which contained the words *'corporate customers'* as well as *'deliveries'*, and in question 3, C duplicated the words *'load'*, *'paper'*, *'instructions'*, *'side of'* and *'photocopier'* from the input text.

In Part 1, candidates should resist the temptation to focus on individual words, but rather aim to interpret the thrust of the text as a whole, and select the option which best expresses this overall message.

Part 2

This task was completed well on the whole, with Questions 9 and 10 proving to be the most challenging. Question 6 presented little difficulty for the majority of candidates, with only a few of the weaker candidates focusing on the duplicated word *'international'* and choosing option C rather than E. Question 7 likewise was done well by most candidates, with only a small proportion being attracted by the word-level relationship between *'boss'* and *'manager'*, and so choosing option G rather than H. Question 8 proved to be the easiest item in this task. In Question 9, a considerable proportion of the candidature were drawn by the term *'MBA'* and selected option D. These candidates failed to interpret the main point of the question, *'buying some shares in internet businesses'*, which should have led them to the corresponding key phrase in A, *'companies to invest in'*. In Question 10, many candidates did not make the connection between *'expand her firm's customer base'* and *'How to Sell your Products'* in the key option F, and instead selected option A on the basis of the words *'software/new technologies'* and *'companies'*.

In Part 2, candidates should try to locate the core element of the sentence and seek the option which best corresponds to the need or intention of the person in the question, rather than focusing on peripheral items of vocabulary.

Part 3

This part of the paper was completed well by the majority of candidates, with no question being significantly easier or more challenging than any other. In Question 11, many candidates selected option H instead of the correct answer, D. This option was particularly appealing because the phrase *'more units were produced than in any previous year'* drew candidates to the peak output bar in year H. Although year D did not attain peak production for the period as a whole, it did have higher output levels than any of the previous years, and is therefore a correct answer. And while H does indeed show a rise in staff numbers, the market share rose rather than declined in that year. Those candidates who chose H either did not notice the word *'declined'* at the end of the sentence, or did not understand its meaning. In Question 13, many candidates chose E rather than the correct answer A. Option E does show a fall in the size of the workforce, but both output and market share rose in that year. Candidates almost certainly chose this option having read *'output .. market share increased'*, but failed to notice the key words *'neither'* and *'nor'*.

In Part 3, candidates should read the questions very carefully, paying particular attention to key grammatical features such as comparatives and negatives, and ensure that the option selected reflects all of the elements described in the question.

Part 4

This task was relatively straightforward, with the majority of candidates understanding the business scenario described. A number of candidates chose B rather than C as the answer to Question 21. In questions of this type, candidates should be aware that a statement is only 'Wrong' if there is explicit information in the text which contradicts it. If there is no such information in the text, then, as in this example, the answer is 'Doesn't say.' However, on the whole all questions in this task were done well, with Question 18 proving to be one of the least demanding items on the paper.

Part 5

This part of the test was generally completed to a good standard. While the majority of candidates did not find Question 24 especially difficult, a notable number chose B in preference to the correct answer, A, having focused exclusively on the phrase *'they began selling sandwiches'* rather than the paragraph as a whole. Many found Question 25 quite challenging, with a large section of the total candidature choosing C rather than A. C is not a correct answer, as the text makes no mention of *'improving the quality'* of ingredients, merely trying out different ones, *'to add to the menu'*. We know that Contrast sells only sandwiches, therefore if the menu is added to, then they must be expanding their range of sandwiches, making A the only possible answer. Question 27 proved to be one of the most challenging items on this paper, with sizeable proportions of the candidature choosing either A or B, rather than the correct answer, C. The statement A is correct in itself, but does not describe a situation considered a danger to the company, and is therefore not an answer to the question. B is not correct either, as although Bell mentions the possibility of sandwiches losing popularity, she suggests that any decline in Contrast's fortunes would be due to another factor. The candidates who answered this question correctly located the phrase *'we've done so well that there's a risk we'll stop trying, which would ruin Contrast'*, and understood that the 'we' referred to the management mentioned earlier in the paragraph.

Candidates should be aware that Part 5 questions focus on large chunks of text, rather than single phrases. They should also bear in mind that for an option to be correct it must not only be a true statement, it must also be both stated in the text and be an appropriate answer to the stem question.

Part 6

This task was handled well by most candidates, with Question 37 proving to be the least challenging question on the paper, and Question 32 among the most demanding. Some candidates also found Question 31 quite challenging, with C being a popular choice for many. Weaker candidates chose *'by'* as the most likely preposition to precede a form such as *'team-working'*, and avoided the correct option B, presumably as *'to'* does not often occur immediately before an *-ing* form. A significant number of candidates chose A as an answer to Question 32, due to the fact that *'one of'* is a considerably higher frequency collocation than *'little of'*. Stronger candidates, however, read on to the end of the sentence and correctly chose C as the only option which was meaningful in the context. In Question 38, the stronger candidates grasped the back reference to the previous statement, understood the element of comparison involved, and chose the correct answer *'more'*. Many weaker candidates failed to see this reference, and chose *'mainly'*, which is not meaningful in this sentence. Question 40 was also a fairly challenging item. Many candidates focused on the words immediately surrounding the gap, read as far as *'questionnaire'*, and chose the word *'what'*. Stronger candidates took into account the previous phrase about the different days, the final words *'a Monday'* or *'a Friday'*, processed the sentence as a whole, and correctly chose *'whether'* to fill the gap.

In Part 6 candidates should check that the chosen word is meaningful in the context of the sentence or paragraph as a whole, not just in relation to the word/words immediately preceding or following the gap.

Part 7

This part was handled well by the majority of candidates, with Question 45 being the only item which presented a significant challenge to candidates. This was largely a result of candidates' misunderstanding of the prompt on the interview form, and so choosing the answer *'Singapore'* or *'conference room'*.

In Part 7, candidates should ensure that all answers are written exactly as they appear in the texts, as otherwise correct words are disallowed if they are spelt wrongly,

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Students need to be exposed to a wide variety of business texts, including not only the longer and more complex texts featured in Parts 4 and 5, but also the short, self-contained notices and messages of Part 1, and the vocabulary-led short texts of Part 2.

Students should seek to develop their business vocabulary, keeping a notebook for new words, perhaps by topic. Work done in class to broaden knowledge of topic areas would be invaluable, since the testing of vocabulary is an important part of the BEC suite as a whole.

Students need to be trained in different reading skills, including skimming and scanning, detailed reading and the interpretation of attitude and opinion. It is also important for students to be aware of what is actually stated in a text as opposed to what is **not** said.

For Part 3, students need to understand the language for expressing change – upward and downward movement, trends and expectations. Revision work on adverbs of degree, perhaps using past papers, would also be useful.

• **DOs and DON'Ts for BEC PRELIMINARY READING**

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| DO | spend time reading the instructions for each part carefully. |
| DO | check the overall meaning of each message, notice or other short text type in Part 1. |
| DO | check you understand the information in the graphic(s) in Part 3 and read the whole of each question carefully. |
| DO | read both the text and the questions in Part 4 carefully; in particular, double check those questions for which you have answered 'doesn't say'. |
| DO | read the input texts carefully in Part 7 to make sure the scenario is clearly understood. |
| DO | keep an eye on the clock so as to finish the whole question paper. |
| DO | allow sufficient time to fill in answers on the answer sheet. |
| DO | aim to allow 5 – 10 minutes checking time at the end. |
| DON'T | rush Parts 4 and 5, which require detailed reading of the text. |
| DON'T | choose an answer for Part 5 which, although true, does not answer the question. |
| DON'T | answer questions in Part 6 without reading the whole text to make sure the context is fully understood. |
| DON'T | copy large chunks from the text(s) in Part 7. |
| DON'T | guess an answer – always check the text. |

BEC PRELIMINARY WRITING

PART	Functions/Communicative Task	Input	Response	Register
1	e.g. (re-) arranging appointments, asking for permission, giving instructions	Rubric only (plus layout of output text type)	Internal communication (medium may be note, message, memo or email) (30–40 words)	Neutral/ formal/ informal
2	e.g. apologising and offering compensation, making or altering reservations, dealing with requests, giving information about a product	One piece of input which may be business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or email), internal communication (medium may be note, memo or email), notice, advert, etc. (plus layout of text type)	Business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or email) (60–80 words)	Neutral/ formal

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

Both Part 1 and Part 2 tasks are compulsory. Part 1 requires candidates to produce a concise piece of internal company communication of between 30 and 40 words. This means writing to a colleague or colleagues within a company on a business-related matter. Candidates are given the layout of memos and emails (e.g. to/from/date/subject) on the question paper and need not copy this out as part of their answer. In Part 2, candidates are asked to produce an extended piece of business correspondence of between 60 and 80 words. This task involves the processing of a short text, such as a letter or advertisement in order to respond to it.

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 Impression 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 note to their assistant in order for her to make an urgent call to a customer which involved saying who she should call, giving her details of what to say and telling her where she could find the information she needed. For Part 2, candidates had to read a letter from the Marketing Director of a business software company, then write a letter of reply to him asking for a product demonstration at their workplace, in addition to explaining why they were interested in one of the products and saying which staff from their company would like a demonstration, and on which date.

Part 1

Most candidates understood the task scenario, and covered the three content points within the word limit. Point 1 presented few difficulties for candidates, and likewise Point 2 was dealt with satisfactorily, with most candidates inventing likely scenarios concerning the message which their assistant had to give to the customer. Examiners noted, however, that although individual content points were addressed well, they were often not clearly linked, particularly an issue in relation to Point 3.

Candidates should aim to produce an answer which not only fulfils the task requirements as set out by the content points, but which also holds together as an internally coherent and cohesive piece of writing.

Part 2

This proved to be a challenging task for many candidates. It would appear that candidates did not fully understand the input data or comprehend all of the scenario, and so produced answers containing a significant degree of irrelevance to the task. Weaker candidates also appeared confused about some of the lexis in the input data, mistakenly assuming '*book-keeping*' to be some kind of shelving or bookcase, and '*demonstration*' to be the same as '*demo disc*'. Point 1 proved somewhat challenging, as in order to achieve full marks candidates were required both to request a product demonstration and say where they would like this to take place. Point 2 was addressed adequately on the whole, although many candidates relied on lifting language from the input data to achieve this. Those candidates who had understood the task scenario had no difficulty addressing Point 3, and Point 4 was relatively straightforward.

Whilst some candidates made use of apparently pre-learned set phrases, which can be a useful strategy, care has to be taken to ensure that this does not detract from paying close attention to the contexts in which those phrases can successfully be used.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Candidates must make sure that they set aside enough time following the reading tasks to read the writing task instructions and associated input carefully and then consider what type of response is required. As Part 2 is longer and more complex than Part 1, it is important that candidates divide their time appropriately, spending more time on Part 2.

A good way of preparing candidates for the writing tasks is to expose them to a variety of business correspondence. By looking at authentic examples, candidates will gain a better understanding of how to structure their answers using the right type of language. This should help to avoid the tendency of some candidates to lift phrases from the question paper for use in their answers, which although counting towards the word limit, cannot be credited.

Part 1

When answering a Part 1 task, candidates need to consider:

- who is the email/memo to?
- what is their relationship to that person/those people?

- what is the situation and the background to it? Do they need to write about a situation in the past, present or future? Are any dates, days or names mentioned? If so, these should be copied down carefully.

It is important for candidates to look carefully at the language in the content points, e.g. describing, explaining, telling, asking, stating, making sure that they understand what these words mean and what the examiner is expecting. Candidates should be encouraged to look at as many past papers as possible in order to familiarise themselves with the format of the questions and the type of language that is used in them.

Candidates are provided with the layout of the email or memo (e.g. to/from/date/subject) and it is not necessary for these elements to be copied out as part of their answer.

Candidates should practise organising information in order to create one or two coherent paragraphs from the information in the three content points. They should avoid including extraneous information, as this can lead to irrelevance and will not earn extra marks, but could lead to the word limit being exceeded.

Candidates should practise the type of language needed to do this task well. It is important to understand the meanings of the basic tenses in English and how to use them appropriately. Sometimes the wrong use of a tense can give the reader a completely different message to the one intended.

Candidates should use functional language, which helps the reader understand the purpose of the information, e.g. *'I am writing to apologise for -ing', 'please don't forget', 'could you please', 'I would like to remind/inform you that', 'you should', 'Thank you for your co-operation'*. Also, the use of imperatives for instructions may be useful for some tasks, e.g. *'(Please) call me as soon as possible'*.

The use of simple linking devices, e.g. *'therefore', 'if you please', 'because'*, helps to guide the reader through the message.

Candidates should be encouraged to check spelling. When a word is spelt wrongly, so that the reader cannot understand it or thinks it is another English word, marks will be lost.

Having completed the task, candidates should check carefully that they have attempted to include all three 'content' points in their writing.

Part 2

It is important for candidates to allow themselves enough time to do the question. They should read and understand the question carefully and consider:

- what type of correspondence has to be produced (letter, email, etc.);
- who the correspondence is to;
- why that person made contact;
- what is the situation and the background behind it;
- what the person is hoping to hear in the reply;
- whether any dates, days or names are mentioned.

As in Part 1, it is important to look carefully at the language in the four content points, e.g. describing, explaining, telling, asking, stating, etc. Similarly, it is recommended that candidates look at as many past papers as possible, so that they know what the questions look like and the type of language used.

The information should be well-organised, avoid repetition and not be excessively lengthy. It is important, however, that enough is written to enable the examiner to make judgements regarding the grammar and vocabulary used and whether it is relevant to this situation.

Candidates should be encouraged to practise writing in a semi-formal or formal style, which helps the reader to follow what they are saying. It is also important to practise organising information, i.e.

in the first paragraph to refer to information included in the input letter and the situation in general, and to provide detailed information in the body of the letter.

Candidates are advised to use functional language as described in Part 1. It is important not just to write a list of sentences. Candidates should try to organise the information using phrases like *'the reason for this is'*, *'Due to ..'*, *'Although'*. Similarly, candidates should not repeat the same word over and over again. They should use other words with the same meaning, e.g. *'the topic'*, *'this subject'*, or use reference words like *'which'*, *'this'* and *'it'*.

Candidates can learn common starting and finishing phrases, e.g. *'I am writing to tell you/confirm/apologise'*, *'Thank you for your letter/email of 12 July'*, *'With regard to your fax of/ Further to your fax of 29th April, ...'*, *'Thanking you in anticipation'*, *'I look forward to hearing from you'*.

It should be noted that, in the case of letters, candidates do not need to include postal addresses in their answers.

Having completed the task, candidates should check carefully that they have attempted to include all four 'content' points in their writing.

- **DOs and DON'Ts for BEC PRELIMINARY WRITING**

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| DO | read the instructions, input and content points thoroughly and underline the important parts. |
| DO | make a plan for each answer. |
| DO | check that you have included all the content points in Parts 1 and 2. |
| DO | expand the points in Part 2 with relevant ideas and information. |
| DO | use a range of appropriate business words and expressions. |
| DO | write clearly, so that the examiner can read your answer. |
| DO | keep within the word limit. |
| DON'T | add too much information to your Part 1 answer. |
| DON'T | 'lift' too much language from the question paper. |
| DON'T | misspell key words which appear on the question paper. |
| DON'T | misinterpret or mix up information contained in the question. |
| DON'T | use words repetitively. |
| DON'T | mix formal and informal language. |

BEC PRELIMINARY LISTENING

PART	Main Skill Focus	Input	Response	Number of questions
1	Listening for specific information	Eight short conversations/ monologues	3-option multiple choice	8
2	Listening for specific information	Short telephone conversation or answerphone message	Gap-filling (numbers and spelling)	7
3	Listening for specific information	Monologue	Note-taking (content words)	7
4	Listening for gist/specific information	Conversation/interview/discussion between two 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 four 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 onto the tape/CD, as is the ten minute transfer time at the end of the test.

Candidates write their answers on the question paper. In Parts 2 and 3 of the test, they are required to write a number, word or short phrase in response to a written prompt. In Parts 1 and 4 of the test, candidates must choose the correct answer from those provided: A, B or C. At the end of the test candidates have ten minutes in which to transfer their answers on to the separate answer sheet.

In Part 1, candidates hear eight short conversations or monologues each typically lasting 15 to 30 seconds. In these extracts, candidates are being tested on their understanding of spoken English used in a range of situations and on their ability to extract factual information. They may need to pick out a name or time or place. Alternatively, they may have to identify a trend in a graph, or a place on a map, or the location of an object in a room. In every case, it will be necessary for the candidates to follow the recording closely.

Part 2 consists of a short telephone conversation or message left on an answerphone, typically lasting around a minute and a half, which contains factual information. On the question paper there is a form, table, chart or set of notes with seven gaps where information is missing. Candidates have to complete each of the gaps. The answers may include dates, prices, percentages or figures. Common words may also be tested and sometimes names will be spelt out on the recording; these types of answer have to be written with correct spelling.

In Part 3 candidates hear a monologue and they have to complete a set of notes or a form which contains seven gaps, using one or two words for each gap. Occasionally, the key to one of the gaps may be a date.

Part 4 contains a longer listening text, which generally takes the form of an interview or discussion between two or possibly more speakers. In this part of the test, candidates are being tested on their ability to understand the gist of a longer text and to extract detailed and specific information as required by the questions. They may also be tested on the speakers' opinions.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Part 1

The majority of candidates did not experience difficulties in this part of the test. Most answered Questions 1 and 4 correctly, but while candidates from some countries found Questions 7 and 8 relatively less demanding, others found them to be more challenging. In Question 7, a significant number of candidates failed to process all the information, and opted for C, which showed a 'slight fall' in February. But to be correct the chart also needed to show 'a bigger drop' in March, and the key was therefore B.

In Question 8, candidates were asked '*What is the man worried about?*' and whilst a number selected C as the key, the man clearly states that the profit forecast is '*better than I thought it would be*' at the start of the dialogue. The key was A, and candidates had to understand that in the phrase '*the sales figures for that period still concern me*', '*that period*' referred back to last year.

Question 2 proved demanding for some candidates who needed to understand that the customer was going to buy a printer without a computer and that there would be no delivery charge in order to select the correct key, B.

Questions 3, 5 and 6 (time, pie chart, lunch arrangements) were handled well by the majority of candidates.

Part 2

Candidates coped well with this part of the test, with Questions 10, 14 and 15 being answered correctly by most. Questions 11 and 12 were the most challenging. Question 11 involved a postcode, which in the UK includes a mixture of letters and numbers, in this case, '*WH1 7BZ*' and many candidates misheard the first two letters as 'double H', thus wrongly interpreting the key as HH1. In Question 12, the key was the 19th October, but a number of candidates gave the first date they heard, 17th October, not realising that this was the date the delivery was ordered rather than the date the delivery was due (as in the prompt).

Part 3

On the whole, candidates dealt well with this part of the paper, with Questions 1, 3 and 5 being the least demanding.

Question 6 proved to be the most challenging. There was evidence that candidates correctly selected the key, '*vacancies*', as it was clearly prompted on the tape and in the notes by the word '*shows*'. However, some candidates then failed to process the information adequately and wrote '*vacancy*', which was not awarded a mark, while others simply misspelled the word, writing '*vacances*', which was also not accepted.

Part 4

For many candidates, Part 4 turned out to be the easiest part of the paper, which is not usually the case. They found Questions 24 and 27 particularly straightforward.

Interestingly, most candidates found Question 23 quite challenging. They often wrongly selected C as the key, perhaps because it was the first 'change' mentioned in the conversation. Some candidates also failed to notice that the idea of repainting the canteen was a possibility for the future, rather than a change that had already been made, as the key (B) required. Others failed to notice that the canteen had a new menu, rather than a new chef, and wrongly gave A as the key.

A number of candidates also experienced some difficulty with Questions 28 and 30. In Question 28, candidates had to listen carefully to several exchanges between the speakers to find out the views of a third person (the MD of the company), about the sports centre. The key was B ('*only a few people would go there*'). The idea of 'dislikes' was cued in by '*isn't keen on*' in the text, and some candidates may not have understood this phrase, as they selected C, which meant they had made a reasonable guess rather than processing information in the conversation. Others wrongly

selected A, perhaps concluding that the sports centre was too costly if few people would use it, although this was not stated.

In Question 30, candidates had to listen carefully to hear that the staff representative ruled out A, when he said: *'I was going to say give everyone questionnaires but there isn't really enough time – your suggestion's best'*. The manager's suggestion, given earlier, was C (talk to reps for each department).

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Part 1

Candidates should be careful not to assume that a single word in the item they hear will provide them with the correct answer to the question. They need to listen to the whole of the item before deciding which of the options they are going to choose as the key. It is also important that candidates listen carefully to the second playing of the item even when they feel that they have already identified the key. This is particularly true in items where the answer will depend on a phrase which refers back to an earlier part of the item (e.g. item 2 on this test).

Part 2

Candidates should realise that the words on the form do not always correspond exactly with the words which they hear (e.g. item 14 where the words on the form are *'total order price'* but the prompting words on the recording are *'total cost quoted'*). Candidates should also be aware that in postcodes in the United Kingdom, numbers and letters are combined at the end of an address.

Part 3

A common problem for candidates in this part of the test occurs when the targeted word is heard after the prompting words that appear on the form. When this happens, the key is normally heard very soon after the prompting word or phrase. Again, this shows how important it is for candidates to listen attentively to the second playing of the recording. Candidates also need to read the words in the notes carefully so that they choose an answer which makes sense. Finally, they should check their spelling of the keys carefully and also decide whether an answer in the singular or plural is required. (NB: A correct key is always exactly as it is heard on the tape – no changes are required).

Part 4

When candidates read through the questions and possible answers before hearing the conversation, they may decide immediately that there are some answers which seem clearly to be keys. Some candidates then choose these answers without listening carefully to what is said on the tape. Candidates should be advised NOT to do this as the answer they have chosen may not reflect what is actually said on the tape. Candidates should also make sure that they know to which speaker a question refers; if they choose an answer based on what the wrong speaker has said, this answer will almost certainly be wrong. They must be sure from the beginning which role each speaker is taking.

• **DOs and DON'Ts for BEC PRELIMINARY LISTENING**

- DO** use the full time allowed to read the questions carefully before each part. Familiarity with what is being asked is likely to help you focus precisely on the points being tested. In Parts 2 and 3, it will also help you to anticipate the kind of answer required. It is also important to read the headings if questions on Parts 2 and 3 are divided into groups under a heading.
- DO** think about the topic, the speaker(s) and the context as you read the questions. It is also important to skim through all the questions for each part before the tape is played; this reduces the likelihood of getting 'lost' and missing a question.
- DO** use the second listening to confirm that your answer is correct.
- DO** expect to write numbers or letters in Part 2 and words or a date in Part 3.
- DO** be aware that all parts of the test contain an element of distraction. You need to listen at sentence/paragraph level to the section of the recording which gives the answer rather than listening at word level only. Don't write down the first suitable word you hear rather than checking to see that that word really does answer the question.
- DO** choose your answers in Parts 1 and 4 by trying to understand the underlying meaning of what the speaker is saying, rather than choosing an option because you recognise a word from the tape.
- DO** make sure you have had adequate practice in listening for numbers and letters and are able to spell common business vocabulary and days of the week. You should also check that numbers, dates prices, etc, are written down according to the conventions of English, e.g. £10 rather than 10£.
- DO** make sure that you have transferred your answers correctly to the answer sheet and checked spellings carefully.
- DON'T** write a number as a word in Part 2, as this wastes time. (However, you will not be penalised if you do this.)
- DON'T** worry if you don't get all the answers the first time you hear each recording.
- DON'T** write more than one or two words in Part 3.
- DON'T** spend too much time on one question. If you are having problems with one question, you should leave it and go on to the next one.

BEC PRELIMINARY SPEAKING

PART	Format/Content	Time	Interaction Focus
1	Conversation between the interlocutor and each candidate General interaction and social language	About 2 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 Organising a larger unit of discourse; giving information and expressing opinions	About 5 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	About 5 minutes	The candidates are presented with a scenario, supported by visual or written prompts, which generates a discussion. The interlocutor extends the discussion with further spoken prompts.

The BEC Preliminary Speaking test is conducted with pairs of candidates by two Oral Examiners: an Interlocutor and an Assessor. The test takes approximately 12 minutes and is divided into three parts:

In Part 1 of the test, candidates are being assessed on their ability to talk briefly about themselves, to provide concise information on subjects such as their home, hobbies and jobs, and to perform simple functions such as agreeing and disagreeing and expressing preferences.

In Part 2, each candidate is given a choice of two topics and has one minute to prepare an individual presentation lasting approximately one minute. After each candidate has finished speaking, the other candidate is asked which of the two bullet points they think is the most important. In Part 2, candidates are being tested on their ability to organise a talk using language accurately and appropriately.

Part 3 of the test is a collaborative task, and involves the interlocutor reading out a scenario and providing prompts in the form of black and white pictures or written text to help the candidates. Candidates then discuss the topic for about two 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 for May 2005 was very similar to that of the same session in 2004. Overall, a lower mean score was achieved by candidates from China compared with candidates from the rest of the world. Analysis of data reveals that candidates had no particular problems with any specific task and that the highest average mark was for Pronunciation, with lower average scores for Grammar and Vocabulary and Discourse Management.

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. In order to provide evidence of their language ability, it is important that candidates should take advantage of the opportunities provided to speak and interact with their partner.

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 in appropriate detail – relatively short responses suffice in this part due to the limited time available. 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 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. Candidates should also follow instructions to look at their partner's topic card, listen carefully to their partner's talk and ask a follow-up question.

Part 3

In this part of the test, candidates who perform well do not just agree with, but develop their partner's contributions, expressing their own opinions, and inviting their colleague(s) to respond. Candidates should make full use of the time available and should not feel concerned when they are asked to stop as this will simply mean 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 phase also provides an opportunity for more reticent candidates to speak. It is vital therefore 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. Candidates who fail to take up the opportunity to show what they are capable of will undoubtedly under-perform. Similarly, candidates should speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard.

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

Candidates should be advised not to practise the interview with their partner before entering the examination room, as examiners are looking for genuine interaction.

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.

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. A Speaking Test Video for all BEC levels is available to help with this.

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. They should avoid cutting across, or interrupting impolitely, what their partner is saying.

- **DOs and DON'Ts for BEC PRELIMINARY SPEAKING**

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| DO | take opportunities to show what you are capable of. |
| DO | try to produce an extended sample of language for the examiner to assess. |
| DO | listen carefully to instructions and questions asked throughout the test and focus your answers appropriately. |
| DO | show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking and respond appropriately to your partner's utterances. |
| DO | speak clearly and loudly enough for the examiners to hear. |
| DO | try to avoid long silences and frequent pauses. |
| DON'T | worry about asking for repetition of instructions if you are unclear about what you have to do. |
| DON'T | try to dominate your partner or interrupt in an abrupt way. |
| DON'T | just respond to what has been said. You should be prepared to initiate discussion and conversation. |

FEEDBACK FORM

BEC Preliminary Examination Report – May 2005

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

Fax: +44 1223 460278

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

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

3. Do you plan to prepare candidates for BEC Preliminary 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. Your name (Optional)
- Centre/School

Thank you.