

BEC

Preliminary

Examination Report

May 2006



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Business English Certificate Preliminary

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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 2006 session, and offers guidance on the preparation of candidates.

• **Candidature**

The May 2006 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, 83% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 11% between 26 and 40 years old, with 75% being female. Just over 40% of the candidates attended exam preparation classes. 37% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career and 33% stated that it was for further study of English.

In countries other than China, 55% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 17% between 26 and 40 years old, with 56% being female. Exam preparation classes were attended by 92% of candidates. 51% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career; 15% said that it was for further study of English.

• **Grading**

Grading took place during June 2006, 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 2006 examination was 45%. The pass rate in China was 32%, compared to 84% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 9% of candidates were awarded a 'Pass with merit' (2% in the case of China, and 29% 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 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 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. 300–400 words): newspaper or magazine article, advert, report, leaflet, etc.	Multiple choice	6
6	Reading – grammatical accuracy and understanding of text structure	Text (approx. 125– 150 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 these tasks well, with Question 1 proving slightly less challenging than the other items, and Question 2 and Question 4 proving marginally more so. In both of these more challenging questions, weaker candidates chose those options which most closely mirrored the wording of the input text. In Question 2, a large proportion of the less able candidates were attracted by the similarity between the phrase in the input text *'whose services may be of interest to you'* and the wording of option B *'Your services could be of interest to'*, and so opted for B rather than C. In Question 4, a significant majority of weaker candidates chose either option A, which repeated the word *'monthly'* from the email text, or C, which similarly duplicated the word *'cheque'*. The key, option B, which was selected by most of the more able candidates, reflected the overall meaning of the communication, but contained none of the words appearing in it.

In Part 1, candidates should not focus on the presence of 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 part was completed to a good standard, with Question 10 being the only item which presented a challenge to a significant number of candidates. In Question 6 most candidates gathered that the idea of *'raising output without increasing costs'* was reflected in the phrase *'improve productivity'*, and so correctly chose option F. Similarly in Question 8, the majority of candidates correctly connected the scenario of a purchasing officer deciding which firms to buy goods from with the phrase *'Comparing potential suppliers'*, and selected option D. In Question 7, however, a large proportion of the less strong candidates chose C, having made word-level associations between the question and this option: Question 7 includes the word *'relocating'*, option C contains the phrase *'recent moves'*, and – perhaps most significantly for the weakest of candidates – the term *'senior'* appears in both question and option. Likewise in Question 9, word-level association accounted for the choice of key for many weaker candidates. Some selected F, basing their choice on the words *'improving'* / *'improve'* occurring in both Question 9 and this option, while others focused solely on the term *'computer games'* in the question, and chose option E, *'The latest developments in information technology'*. Those candidates who interpreted the main import of the sentence as being the firm's interest in improving the appearance of their sales outlets, meanwhile, correctly chose option B, *'Making stores more attractive.'* Question 10 proved to be one of the most demanding items on this paper, with many candidates making the connection between *'Chief Executive'* and *'top financial manager'* and so opting for G. However, a sizeable proportion of stronger candidates did realise that the main message of the sentence was that the person wanted to see a report of his recent appointment as Chief Executive, and so correctly chose option C.

In Part 2, candidates should avoid focusing on peripheral items of vocabulary, but rather try to locate the core element of each sentence, and seek the option which best corresponds to the specific need or intention it describes.

Part 3

For the majority of candidates, Part 3 was relatively straightforward, with Question 11 appearing to be the least demanding of the five items. Of the remaining four, no one question proved to be significantly more challenging than any other. Where incorrect options were chosen, these tended to be based on correct information for only two of the companies described.

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

Part 4

This part was handled well by most candidates, with Question 22 proving the most straightforward, and Question 20 the most demanding. In Question 20, a significant number of candidates chose A, rather than the key C, as a response to the statement *'Loyalty's car insurance is currently the cheapest available.'* While the third paragraph refers to the fact that Loyalty has increased its car insurance less than all other companies, it does not state that the cost of its insurance is actually lower than that of other companies – the key is therefore 'Doesn't Say'. Although Question 21 was not a particularly challenging item for the candidature overall, a number of less strong candidates failed to interpret the phrase *'share its success with its customers'* as meaning the same as *'passing on any improvement in its financial position to its customers'* and so chose C, rather than the correct response, A.

In Part 4, candidates should be aware that a statement is only 'Right' if there is explicit information in the text which has the same meaning as the information in the statement. Likewise, 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 the answer is 'Doesn't Say.'

Part 5

Most candidates achieved a good understanding of the text in this part, and responded correctly to the questions. Question 23 proved to be the least demanding of these, with Question 24, Question 26 and Question 27 being among the more challenging. In Question 26, a large proportion of the less strong candidates chose option A, having focused solely on the phrase *'They then select the IES executive who best fits their requirements.'* However, the candidates who followed the back-reference of the pronoun *'They'* to the previous sentence, *'we introduce five or six candidates to their board of directors'*, understood that *'They'* refers to the company's board of directors, and correctly chose option C. In Question 27 more than half of the weaker candidates focused on the phrase *'we also help out other companies which we think have a good recovery potential'* and chose option C. Option C is incorrect, as the text states that the IES helps these clients *'For a fee'*. Better candidates located the phrase *'The service is free to these existing clients'*, followed the reference back to the phrase in the previous sentence *'many troubled companies, including those that we have already provided venture capital for'*, and correctly chose option A.

Candidates should be aware that Part 5 questions focus on large chunks of text, rather than single phrases. Candidates will be required to process the language at both lexical and syntactic levels, and follow cohesive devices forwards and backwards through the text. 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 explicitly stated in the text, and be an appropriate answer to the stem question.

Part 6

Candidates handled this part well on the whole, with Question 29 presenting the least challenge, and Question 34 and Question 35 the most.

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. If they had followed this advice, far fewer candidates would have chosen option A in Question 34, for example.

Part 7

The majority of candidates grasped the scenario presented in the input texts and understood what was required of them in the output text, with Question 41 proving the least demanding of the five items. Question 43 was found to be the most challenging, as the correct response, (1st) *August*, required candidates to process both the information that the annual dinner was on 29th August, and that the invitation cards were needed four weeks in advance.

In Part 7, candidates should ensure that all answers are written exactly as they appear in the texts. Even if the answer offered by the candidate is a correctly spelt word, it will be disallowed if it is not exactly the same as the one/ones which appear in the texts.

- **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.

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

Candidates should

- spend time reading the instructions for each part carefully.
- check the overall meaning of each message, notice or other short text type in Part 1.
- check they understand the information in the graphic(s) in Part 3 and read the whole of each question carefully.
- read both the text and the questions in Part 4 carefully; in particular, double check those questions for which they have answered 'doesn't say'.
- read the input texts carefully in Part 7 to make sure the scenario is clearly understood.
- keep an eye on the clock so as to finish the whole question paper.
- allow sufficient time to fill in answers on the answer sheet.
- aim to allow 5 – 10 minutes checking time at the end.

Candidates shouldn't

- rush Parts 4 and 5, which require detailed reading of the text.
- chose an answer for Part 5 which, although true, does not answer the question.
- answer questions in Part 6 without reading the whole text to make sure the context is fully understood.
- copy large chunks from the text(s) in Part 7.
- 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**

Part 1

This task was successfully achieved in most cases, with many candidates producing interesting and appropriate responses to content point 3. However, some candidates seemed not to have understood that Mr Ruiz was coming to visit the writer, and that Helen was being asked to occupy him only until the writer arrived.

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 which would be fully understood by the target reader.

Part 2

Although there were many well-written and appropriate responses to this task, there were some candidates who found the task quite challenging. Many of these candidates resorted to copying large sections out of the input text. Some candidates seemed not to have fully understood the nature of the product being promoted, and showed a certain degree of confusion regarding the precise meanings of the terms '*computer*', '*screen*' and '*monitor*'.

Some candidates responded to the first point by stating simply how long their company had been in business, without specifying their line of business. A number of responses to the second point relied heavily on duplication of the input text, particularly among those candidates who found the scenario rather challenging. The words '*enquiring*' and '*demonstration*' seemed not to be fully understood by certain candidates. As a result, there were some responses to points 3 and 4 which did not fully address these content elements.

In this part, candidates should avoid copying large sections of the input text into their answers. They should be aware that the function of the input text is to establish the scenario for the task, and to act as a resource to provide ideas for their output.

- **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.

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

Candidates should

- read the instructions, input and content points thoroughly and underline the important parts.
- make a plan for each answer.
- check that they have included all the content points in Parts 1 and 2.
- expand the points in Part 2 with relevant ideas and information.
- use a range of appropriate business words and expressions.
- write clearly, so that the examiner can read the answer.
- keep within the word limit.

Candidates shouldn't

- add too much information to their Part 1 answer.
- 'lift' too much language from the question paper.
- misspell key words which appear on the question paper.
- misinterpret or mix up information contained in the question.
- use words repetitively.
- 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 answer phone 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 on to 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 answer phone, 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

This part of the test proved straightforward for most candidates. Item 1, the sales chart and items 5 and 7, which tested arrangements and specific dates and days, were very accessible to many candidates. Some candidates mistakenly selected B as the answer to item 5, presumably because the '25th' was repeated at the end of the dialogue, although it had been clearly ruled out as the key earlier.

Most candidates also found items 3 and 4 very straightforward. Interestingly, a number of candidates found item 3 more challenging, perhaps because they failed to process all the information and therefore did not realise that although there was a problem with delivering the brochures, it was because the drivers of the vehicles were ill (A), not because some of the vehicles were faulty (B), or because machinery was broken (C). C was ruled out by the words '*Something else this time*'.

Items 2, 6 and 8 proved the most challenging in this section. In item 2, many candidates opted for B, not realising that the key (A) was given at the end of the monologue and referred back to the '*creation of jobs*' mentioned earlier. In item 6, many candidates missed the key word '*together*' and so failed to understand that Europe and the United States combined had the same exports as South East Asia, which meant that the key could only be B. In item 8, many candidates mistakenly chose B as the answer, perhaps because they thought that giving the reference number of a part meant an order was being placed. Others chose C, misunderstanding the phrase '*adjust the measurements*'. In fact the key was A, as reflected in the words '*We're getting more faults than usual, so I want you to look at the part again*'.

It was pleasing to see that most candidates performed well on this section.

Part 2

This part of the test proved to be straightforward for many candidates, with items 11, 13 and 14 mostly being answered correctly.

Items 10, 12 and 15 proved the most challenging. In items 10 and 15, a significant number of candidates gave the wrong answer, selecting the distraction which was clearly ruled out rather than the correct answer. Thus in item 10 they wrote '£21.75' rather than '£18.75' and in item 15 they wrote '7th' rather than '5th'. In item 12, however, the main problem was that some candidates misheard the answer and so wrote '*goal*' instead of the correct answer, '*gold*'.

Part 3

It was pleasing to see that, on the whole, candidates coped well with this part of the paper, since productive answers can prove challenging. Many candidates dealt well with nearly all questions, and found item 20 particularly straightforward.

However, some candidates did find part 3 more challenging. In particular, they found items 16, 18 and 19 more demanding. In item 16, candidates often chose the correct answer, but then spelled it wrongly, writing '*advertaising*' rather than '*advertising*'. In 18, many candidates misheard the answer, and thus gave '*contracts*' as the answer rather than '*contacts*'. In 19, a surprising number of candidates made mistakes with the spelling of the word '*camera*', which is a very high frequency word.

Part 4

Most candidates performed well on part 4, with the first question, 23, being answered correctly by the majority of candidates. Some candidates performed better in this part of the paper than in Parts 2 and 3.

Question 28 proved to be the most demanding item for all candidates. Candidates frequently failed to pick up on the fact that Nigel Player decided to run an airline service because his

customers convinced him there was a market for it (A). A significant number of candidates chose B, perhaps because there was a reference in the text to *'twice a week'*, although this was not in connection with another airline. Others went for C, presumably misled by the reference to *'competitive prices'*, and misinterpreting this as a reference to profitability.

In addition, a number of candidates found items 27 and 29 less straightforward. In 27, the key was C, given in the phrase *'would take much longer'*, so the journey by boat was, by implication, slow. Some candidates heard the words *'reliable even in bad weather'*, and deduced wrongly that this made B the key. Others presumably failed to hear the negative in *'wouldn't cost so much'* and thus wrongly opted for A. In 29, candidates had to notice that the question was *'What most helped Nigel Player run a passenger airline?'* Many candidates opted for A or B, both of which described things that helped Nigel Player. However, stronger candidates focused on the word 'most' and realised that this equated with *'the main thing really was that I'd already had a year's experience of flying and transporting goods, so I understood about regulations and so on'* (Key C). This shows that it is always important to read the question very carefully.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Part 1

Candidates should be careful not to assume a single word in the recording they hear will provide them with the correct answer to the question. They need to listen to the whole of the recording before choosing one of the options. It is also important that candidates listen carefully to the second playing of the recording even when they feel that they have already identified the key. This is particularly true in items where the answer depends 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 numbers and words that are used to fill the gaps should be written exactly as they are heard, but that they will make sense in the context. (This might have prevented candidates from writing *'goal'* instead of *'gold'* in item 12 on this test.)

Part 3

Candidates should be aware that the prompting word or words in the notes will not necessarily be identical to what they hear on the tape, although they should be a close paraphrase. The key is normally heard very soon after the prompting word or phrase, although candidates should be aware that there is also sometimes a distractor too. It is therefore important for candidates to listen attentively to the second playing of the tape to check what they have written. Candidates also need to read the words on 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 necessary.)

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. No matter how plausible an answer may be, it cannot be the key unless it is actually mentioned in the conversation. 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.

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

Candidates should

- use the full time allowed to read the questions carefully before each part. Familiarity with what is being asked is likely to help candidates focus precisely on the points being tested. In Parts 2 and 3, it will also help candidates 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.
- skim through all the questions for each part before the tape is played; this reduces the likelihood of getting 'lost' and missing a question.
- use the second listening to confirm that their answers are correct.
- expect to write numbers and/or letters in Part 2 and words and a date in Part 3.
- be made aware that all parts of the test, but especially Parts 2 and 3, contain an element of distraction. Candidates need to listen at sentence/paragraph level to the section of the recording which gives the answer rather than listening at word level only. Some candidates appear to write down the first suitable word they hear rather than checking to see that that word really does answer the question.
- choose their 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 they recognise a word from the tape.
- make sure they have had adequate practice in listening for numbers and letters and are able to spell common business vocabulary and days of the week. They should also check that numbers, dates, etc, are written down according to the conventions of English, e.g. £10 rather than 10£.
- make sure they have transferred their answers correctly to the answer sheet and checked spellings carefully.

Candidates shouldn't

- write a number as a word in Part 2, as this wastes time. (However, they are not penalised if they do this.)
- worry if they don't get all the answers the first time they hear each piece.
- write more than one or two words in Part 3.
- spend too much time on one question. If they are having problems with one question, they should leave it and go on to the next question.

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 three 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 2006 was very similar to that of the same session in 2005. 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 then answer a 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.

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

Candidates should

- take opportunities to show what they are capable of.
- 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.
- show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking and respond appropriately to their partner's utterances.
- speak clearly and loudly enough for the examiners to hear.
- try to avoid long silences and frequent pauses.

Candidates shouldn't

- worry about asking for repetition of instructions if they are unclear about what they have to do.
- try to dominate their partner or interrupt in an abrupt way.
- just respond to what has been said. They should be prepared to initiate discussion and conversation.

FEEDBACK FORM

BEC Preliminary Examination Report – May 2006

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.