



UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE
ESOL Examinations

Experts in Language Assessment

Business English Certificates

BEC Preliminary Examination Report

May 2007

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Business English Certificate Preliminary

Examination Report

May 2007

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WEBSITE REFERENCE

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides a general view of how candidates performed overall and on each paper in the May 2007 session, and offers guidance on the preparation of candidates.

• **Grading**

Grading took place during June 2007, approximately five weeks after the examination was taken.

The BEC Preliminary papers total 120 marks, after weighting. Each component (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 components.

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 (Reading and Listening)
- the advice of the Principal Examiners based on the performance of candidates, and on the recommendation of examiners where this is relevant (Writing and Speaking)
- 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 2007 examination was 48%. The pass rate in China was 38%, compared to 78% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 8% of candidates were awarded a 'Pass with merit' (2% in the case of China, and 25% for the rest of the world).

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

• **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 13 weeks after the May examination session, including Examination Papers 1–3, tape/CD and tapescript for Paper 3, keys, sample Speaking test material and Paper 2 mark schemes and sample scripts).
- *BEC Speaking Test Video* (for information on the Speaking test including worksheets for candidates).

In addition, online teaching resources for BEC 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 component is based on a range of 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 three-option 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 the input 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 dealt with these tasks well, with Question 1 and Question 2 proving the least challenging, and Question 3 and Question 5 the most challenging. In Question 3, option B was chosen by a large proportion of weaker candidates. This option may have appealed to these candidates because it included the words *combining*, *small businesses*, and *office services* which also appeared in the advertisement, whereas option A and the correct answer, option C, did not duplicate the language of the input to the same extent. In Question 5, options B and C contained the immediately noticeable content words of the newsflash – the number *600* and the month *January* – and so attracted significant numbers of weaker candidates. Meanwhile, stronger candidates chose the correct option A, which encapsulated the overall meaning of the input text in the phrase *increasing the capacity of its factory*, while not actually duplicating the language of the input text.

In Part 1, candidates should not focus on the recurrence of individual words, but rather aim to interpret the thrust of the text as a whole, and then select the option which best expresses this global message.

Part 2

Part 2 was answered well by the majority of candidates, with Question 6 proving to be the most straightforward, and Question 7 to be slightly more demanding than subsequent questions. When tackling this question, many of the weaker candidates failed to interpret *getting out of the red* and *reducing overheads* in option F as paraphrases of the phrases *pay off debts* and *cut costs* in the Question 7 sentence, and chose either option B on account of the words *executive employment*, or option A on account of its loose association with financial issues.

In Part 2, candidates should avoid being distracted by peripheral items of vocabulary, but rather try to locate the core element of each statement of need or intention, and seek the option which best describes this.

Part 3

Part 3 was also answered well by the majority of candidates, with Question 11 proving to be somewhat less challenging than the other questions in the set, and Question 14 slightly more challenging. In most cases where candidates chose an incorrect option, this option corresponded to some, but not all, of the features described in the sentence. For example, in Question 15, year F was a popular choice among weaker candidates, as this option did indeed show information corresponding to *the amount spent on training went up again* and that *production rose*. It was, however, an incorrect answer, as although production rose, it did not rise *more steeply than at any other time during the period*. The subsequent rise in production between year F and year G was quite clearly the steepest in the period, making G, not F, the correct answer.

In Part 3, candidates should read the entire sentence, paying careful attention not only to content language such as *production*, *increase* etc, but also to key grammatical features such as comparatives, superlatives and negatives. Candidates should also ensure that the option selected reflects all the elements of the descriptive sentence.

Part 4

The questions in this part proved quite wide-ranging in terms of the challenge they presented to candidates. While Question 16 was answered correctly by a very high proportion of examinees, Question 20 appears to have been considerably more challenging for many candidates. A significant number of weaker candidates chose option A as the answer to this question, on the basis of the phrase in the text *it is essential for effective CRM to record*

customer information on a good computer database. Stronger candidates, however, read the entire sentence, noted that the above phrase was preceded by the word *Although* and followed by *the real skill is...*, and correctly understood the meaning of the sentence to be that, while appropriate technology is important, it is not *the most important component*, and that the required answer is in fact B.

Candidates should bear in mind that for a sentence to be 'Right' it must not only be a true statement in itself, but there must also be explicit information in the text which has the same meaning. Likewise, for a statement to be 'Wrong' there needs to be explicit information in the text which contradicts this statement. If there is no information to either confirm or contradict the statement, then the answer will be 'Doesn't Say'.

Part 5

Most candidates performed well in Part 5, with Question 26 presenting the least challenge to most candidates. Q23 was among the more demanding questions in the set, as many weaker candidates failed to interpret the sentence saying that good managers *share certain qualities with one another* as being a paraphrase of *some of these skills are common to all good managers*. So rather than choosing the correct option B, many weaker candidates selected option C on the basis of the words *skills, good* and *working environment*, all language duplicated from the input text. And while option C is a statement which one might reasonably assume to be correct, it is not one explicitly stated in the text.

Candidates should be aware that Part 5 questions focus on large chunks of text rather than single phrases. They need to locate the appropriate section of the text for each question, and are required to process the language in it at both lexical and syntactic levels, and follow cohesive devices backwards and forwards in the text. They should also bear in mind that for an answer to be correct it must not only be a true statement in itself, but also be explicitly stated in the relevant section of the text, and be an appropriate answer to the question.

Part 6

Candidates generally handled this task well, with the first and the last questions proving the least demanding, and Question 34, Question 35 and Question 39 presenting more challenges to weaker candidates. In Question 35, a popular choice for many candidates was option A, *however*. While a sentence reading *Low cost airlines do not, however, have to pay commission to travel agents* would be, in itself, grammatically correct, syntactically cohesive and semantically meaningful, it is not a correct option in the context of the paragraph as a whole. For *however* to be the correct word to fill this gap, the sentence would have to introduce information which was in some way contradictory, or present an opposing argument, to the preceding sentence. Those candidates who correctly chose option C, *therefore*, understood that the sentence presented information which followed on as a result of the information about customers' booking directly with the airline in the preceding sentence, and that *Low cost airlines do not, therefore, have to pay commission to travel agents* was the only meaningful option in the overall context.

Candidates should be aware that a correct option needs to be not only grammatically correct and meaningful in relation to the words immediately surrounding it, but in relation to the meaning of the text as a whole. It is recommended that candidates read the entire text once before attempting the questions, and once after completing the tasks, to check for coherence and cohesion.

Part 7

The majority of candidates understood the scenario set out in the input memos and filled in the gaps in the booking form appropriately. Question 43 and Question 44 were the least challenging for candidates, while Question 45 proved the most demanding.

In Part 7 candidates should ensure that the word(s) they give as an answer should be in exactly the same form as they appear in the text, with particular attention paid to spelling.

- **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 examination 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 completed well by most candidates. In bullet point one, weaker candidates wrote that there would be a change in working hours, but failed to describe what that change would be. Bullet point two was achieved satisfactorily by the majority of candidates. In bullet point three, weaker candidates did not make it clear exactly when the change was going to take place.

Part 2

This task was generally completed well, with bullet points one and four presenting few challenges to candidates. The candidates who found points two and three demanding were those who seemed unclear about the service which Speedex was offering, and/or copied out language directly from the letter.

It is important for candidates to read the input text carefully, and to use the information in it to help them understand what is required in the writing task. However, they should not duplicate whole phrases or sentences from the input text.

- **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 text and the situation in general, and to provide detailed information in the body of the text.

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

Most candidates performed well on this section, with Questions 1 and 4 being the most straightforward. In Question 1, the key was B. Candidates had to identify a day, Thursday, and realise that it referred back to a date, the 24th. Stronger candidates managed this successfully, but it was clear that weaker candidates simply selected the first or last date they heard, and so wrongly selected A or C. In Question 4, which involved visuals, the candidates had to process two elements of a brochure design. The key was A, which showed a world map with the name of the company written down the side. Weaker candidates only processed one element correctly, and thus wrongly selected B or C.

Careful listening was also required for Question 2, in which candidates were asked to identify which stationery items were delivered. The key was given by the words 'we're still waiting for the pens and folders' which meant that the items that had been delivered were pencils, and the key was A. In addition, some candidates had difficulty with Question 3, which involved identifying the reason why the man was apologising. All the options were plausible reasons for apology, but the key was given at the end of the dialogue, and candidates had to recognise that 'I promise it won't happen again' referred back to passing a confidential report to someone, which meant he had made a mistake and that B was the key.

The two graph Questions, 5 and 8, were mostly answered correctly. Those candidates who got the answers wrong failed to process the final piece of information. This meant that they chose C instead of the correct answer, B, in Question 5, because they failed to take account of the information given for the month of April. Similarly, in Question 8 candidates selected A or C instead of the key, B, if they failed to realise that the sales figure had to be larger than the marketing figure, which represented about one quarter of investment.

Most candidates dealt well with Question 6, correctly identifying that if a car was left with no fuel, it meant that some staff were forgetting to refill them with petrol and that the key was B. Weaker candidates who were unsure of the answer tended to opt wrongly for C, because they heard the phrase 'at least they do tidy up inside them now'. Finally, in Question 7, the key was A, and candidates needed to understand the phrase 'she's actually given in her notice' in order to identify this correctly.

Part 2

Questions 9 – 15 tested numbers and spelling given in a conversation between a journalist and the head of public relations in a supermarket chain. Candidates mostly demonstrated a sound grasp of spellings and numbers in English, and performed well on this task. However, Question 9 tested the spelling of an English name, Rothwell, and some weaker candidates got this wrong because they failed to recognise the letter W and instead wrote UU.

In addition, candidates generally found the key to Question 14 most challenging, possibly because they failed to read the notes carefully which stated that two hypermarkets were going to be built, and the head of public relations said that each of them measured 16,000 square metres.

Part 3

Some candidates found Part 3 more challenging than Part 2, but performance overall was good. The majority of candidates found Questions 16 and 20 most straightforward, presumably because they featured very familiar business terms, namely 'training' and 'promoting products'.

Some candidates struggled with spelling on Questions 19, 20, 21 and 22, but had clearly identified the correct answer. However, Questions 17 and 18 proved the most challenging.

In Question 17, candidates struggled to spell the word 'consultants' in the name of the speaker's present company, Star Consultants. In Question 18, it seemed that many candidates were unfamiliar with the word 'graduates', although it is also a high frequency word, and one they could be expected to know at this level.

Part 4

Candidate performance was again mostly good on this part, and the majority of candidates began well, answering Question 23 correctly.

Questions 24 and 27 proved the most challenging. The key to Question 24 was B, and the speaker placed a strong emphasis on the expense of relocation. However, many candidates selected C, which showed that they had failed to process correctly the last thing the speaker said in this part of the tapescript. He was giving his own viewpoint on relocation, whereas the question asked why companies were sending fewer employees abroad. Similarly, a number of weaker candidates selected A as the key to 27, although there is no mention of the company manufacturing materials. The company was involved in building work, and this is paraphrased in key C by the words 'constructing an office building'.

- **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 questions where the answer depends on a phrase which refers back to an earlier part of the item (e.g. Questions 1 and 3 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. They need practice in a range of numbers, large and small, in different business contexts. They also need to be familiar with the English alphabet and able to recognise more challenging spellings, such as words with double letters, and less familiar ones such as 'w', which appeared in Question 9 of 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 recording, although they should be a close paraphrase, and that the object of the task is not dictation. 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, in the form of a plausible answer which does not fit the notes. It is therefore important for candidates to listen attentively to the second playing of the recording 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 recording – 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 in the recording. Candidates should be advised NOT to do this as the answer they

have chosen may not reflect what is actually said. No matter how plausible an answer may be, it cannot be the key unless it is mentioned in the interview/discussion. (In this test, option A in Question 27 was a good example of this sort of answer). It is also extremely important that candidates read the question carefully and make sure that their answer matches what is said in the recording. (There were problems with this in the answers given to Question 24).

- **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 in May 2007 was consistent with that of May 2006. 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 2007

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.