



UNIVERSITY *of* CAMBRIDGE  
ESOL Examinations

Experts in Language Assessment

# Business English Certificate

## PRELIMINARY Examination Report

May 2008

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# **Business English Certificate Preliminary**

## **Examination Report**

**May 2008**

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### **WEBSITE REFERENCE**

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

[www.CambridgeESOL.org](http://www.CambridgeESOL.org)

## INTRODUCTION

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

### • **Grading**

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

The 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 2008 examination was 46%. The pass rate in China was 33%, compared to 81% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 8% of candidates were awarded a 'Pass with merit' (2% in the case of China, and 26% 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/](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](http://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 parts (see Parts 1, 3 and 7), 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 on to an answer sheet, as instructed on the question paper, with **no extra time** being allowed for this purpose. Once received at Cambridge ESOL, candidates' answer sheets are computer-scanned.

Part 1 consists of five short texts, each of which is 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 graphics, 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 word, a number or a 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 five tasks well. Question 1 proved the least challenging, and Question 4 the most challenging. In each case, the candidates who chose incorrect answers were those who failed to grasp the overall communication expressed.

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

### **Part 2**

Most candidates coped well with this task, finding Question 6 the most demanding question of the set, and Question 8 the least demanding. In Question 6, a sizeable proportion of weaker candidates focused on the words *'translation agency'* and chose option A, *'language training and interpreters'*. Others chose options which duplicated some of the vocabulary of the question, such as option F, which included the word *'abroad'*, or G, which included the word *'agency'*. More able candidates, meanwhile, identified *'help her research the needs of potential clients'* as being the key phrase of the sentence, interpreted this as a requirement for marketing advice, and so correctly chose option D.

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 completed well by most candidates, with only questions 12 and 14 presenting a challenge to a significant number of the weakest entrants.

In Question 12, many of the least able candidates chose option C on the basis of its 2006 peak in delivery rating, but failed to take into account the fact that the quality data in this option did not correspond to the situation described in the question. More able candidates correctly chose option E, which matched the question from the point of view of both delivery and quality.

While Question 14 proved to be well within the capabilities of most entrants, a noticeable proportion of less able candidates selected option D, which reflected only the first part of the question. Weaker candidates failed to recognise that the phrase *'smallest in 2005'* referred not to the ratings, but to the gap between the ratings for the two categories. Option D's visibly low ratings in 2005, which then rose the following year, clearly did much to increase the appeal of this option for such candidates. The majority of candidates, however, correctly chose option A, as this showed the quality rating remaining relatively high while the delivery rating steadily declined.

In Part 3, candidates should read the entire question, paying careful attention not only to directional vocabulary such as *'rise'*, *'fall'* etc, but also to less predictable words such as *'gap'*. Grammatical language, such as comparatives, superlatives and negatives, is also key to grasping the full meaning of the sentence. Candidates should be aware that there are options on the page which will correspond to some, but not all, of the features of the descriptive sentences. They should therefore ensure that the option selected reflects *all* elements of the situation described in the question.

## 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

While the six questions in Part 5 were all well within the capabilities of most of the candidature, the task overall proved to be somewhat more demanding than other sections of the paper. Candidates performed best on Questions 26 and 27, and appeared most challenged by Question 25. For this question, option B was by far the most appealing among the weaker candidates, who may have chosen this option simply because the word *'guests'* appears in the relevant piece of text. While option B presents what is, in itself, a highly plausible supposition, there is no information in the text to support this answer. Stronger candidates, meanwhile, correctly interpreted the phrase *'... it has the disadvantage of providing savings for those customers rather than for the guests themselves'* as having the same meaning as option C. As this question required some grammatical back-referencing to the previous sentence, via the pronouns *'this'*, *'it'* and *'those'*, Question 25 served to identify particularly well those candidates with more advanced reading skills.

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

Most candidates handled this task well, with Questions 36 and 39 proving to be the least demanding, and Question 34 to be the most demanding.

Candidates should bear in mind that a correct option needs to be grammatically correct and meaningful not only in relation to the words immediately surrounding it, but also in relation to the text as a whole. Question 38 provides an illustration of this point. Many candidates chose option C, *'Therefore'*, thus creating a sentence which would be semantically meaningful if read in isolation. It is nevertheless an incorrect answer, because the previous sentence refers to the organisation's continued profit growth – a situation which would not logically force a company to close stores. Stronger candidates took this into account, and correctly selected *'However'* as the only linking word which made sense in this context. It is recommended that candidates read the entire text once before attempting the questions, and once after completing the task, to check for coherence and cohesion.

## Part 7

Candidates generally understood the scenario presented in this task, and completed the form successfully. While Question 41 proved relatively unchallenging, many entrants found Question 42 to be somewhat less accessible. Some weaker candidates understood this to be a reference to the title of the form, rather than the title of the event which Maria James was to attend, namely the 2008 International Marketing Conference.

In Part 7 candidates should ensure that the word(s) they give as an answer are 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 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 the message/note/email (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**

The candidates awarded higher marks for this task were those who provided a clearly expressed and logical reason why the company would be moving to the Alpha Business Centre, an indication of when this move would occur, and reference to how staff could find out more information about this planned move. The first point was the part of the task which was generally the least well handled. While stronger candidates provided plausible reasons for the planned move, such as an increase in staff numbers, or made a reference to the better facilities at the Alpha Business Centre, weaker candidates tended to give answers which were ambiguous, unclear or irrelevant. Although some weaker candidates omitted point two entirely, the majority achieved this part of the task successfully. Acceptable answers to the third point were either references to how staff could access more information themselves – such as looking on the company website, or contacting a particular person – or reference to what further information would be sent to them. Candidates were awarded lower marks if they failed to address any of these three points.

### **Part 2**

The candidates who handled this task satisfactorily expressed a suitable reaction to the invitation to write an article, mentioned a business topic for the article, gave a relevant reason for choosing that topic and/or a reason why they considered that topic to be important, and made an appropriately worded request for information about the deadline for the article. Point one was generally answered well, with most candidates expressing a feeling such as 'pleased'. Point two was also handled well on the whole, although some weaker candidates failed to realise that the chosen topic needed to have relevance to business. Point three elicited some excellent and creative answers from many candidates. Most candidates achieved point four successfully, although some candidates merely gave a date when they would send the article, rather than asking when it needed to be ready. Some candidates misunderstood the scenario as a whole and thought that the article was to be written by the magazine. These candidates were accordingly awarded lower marks, as were those who omitted any of the four points.

- **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/note 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 output text (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 1 and 4 of the test, candidates must choose the correct answer from those provided, A, B or C. In Parts 2 and 3 of the test, they are required to write numbers, letters, words or short phrases in response to a written prompt. 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 understand a speaker's opinion. 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 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. Names will sometimes 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 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 occasionally three, 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 will also be tested on the speakers' opinions.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

## **Part 1**

Most candidates performed well on this section, with Question 1 being the most straightforward. Candidates had to identify where the title would be placed in the layout, which required processing the whole of what the woman said. The phrase which gave the key (B) *'we'd like to go with that'* referred back to *'We liked your suggestion that the title should run across the pictures'*, and most candidates realised this. However, a few weaker candidates wrongly assumed that the phrase referred to what immediately preceded it *'instead of above or below it'*, and thus wrongly selected A or C.

Careful listening was also required for Questions 2, 3 and 4. In Question 2, candidates were asked to identify what a woman said about her company. She referred to the number of clients, and finished the conversation by mentioning competitors, but the key (C), was given with the words *'However our order books are fuller than they normally are at this time of year'*, which came in the middle of the conversation. Similarly, in Question 3, candidates needed to process the conversation as a whole, rather than just individual words. The man said *'I know TV commercials are expensive but I'm sure they'd pay for themselves in increased sales'* and the key (B) was confirmed when the woman replied *'Okay let's do that'*. In Question 4, both the venue and the costs were mentioned, but clearly ruled out, and the man gave the answer (C) when he said *'Actually, I understand it's because very few people can get time off to go to it'*.

The two graph questions, 5 and 7, were mostly answered correctly. Those candidates who got the answers wrong failed to process all the information. This meant that they chose A or C instead of the correct answer, B, in Question 5, because they did not take account of the fact that although prices had risen overall, there had been a downturn in February. Similarly, in Question 7 candidates selected A instead of the key, B, if they failed to realise that rice *'used to be'* the most valuable export, but that *'these days the chief earner is coffee'*. In addition, those candidates who wrongly selected C as the key had failed to understand the last phrase *'and textiles now represent more than a quarter of total export earnings'*.

Many candidates found questions 6 and 8 the most challenging in this Part. In Question 6, candidates had to process the references to people and time carefully to reach the correct answer. B and C are wrong because the speaker is only going to recommend hiring the sales agent, and he is hoping that a large order will be placed; neither has actually been done. The key, A, is given with the words *'I also visited a factory which makes keyboards – they're looking for a cheaper supplier of cables ... I'm hoping they'll place a big order,'* so that action has already taken place and the man has already met his potential client.

In Question 8 the key is C: the man needs the figures for *'the lecture on Friday'*. A number of candidates wrongly assumed that the key was B, because the man was on his way to a monthly department meeting. He also mentions being at a sales conference (A) *'tomorrow'*, but this is the reason why he wants to collect the figures, not what he needs them for.

## **Part 2**

Questions 9–15 tested numbers and spelling given in a phone message in which a man left details about changes to a product. Candidates mostly demonstrated a sound grasp of numbers in English, and performed well on this task, with Question 15, the phone number, proving most straightforward. If mistakes were made, it was sometimes because candidates wrongly opted for the distractor. For example, in Question 12, many candidates put 110 as the answer rather than 114, which was correct.

However, some weaker candidates found Question 9 difficult because the key contained a mixture of letters and numbers and there was some confusion between the letters J and G, with many candidates writing XG19 as the key rather than the correct version, XJ19.

In addition, candidates generally found the key to Question 14, which involved spelling a name, very challenging, with considerable problems with vowel sounds being revealed. As a result, some candidates produced INOUI or ANOUI as the answer rather than the correct version, INOUE. It seems that most candidates would benefit from further practice in the spelling of names and mixed letter/number combinations.

### **Part 3**

Overall performance on Part 3 was also good, which was pleasing. The majority of candidates found Questions 16 and 18, and Questions 20–22 very straightforward, presumably because they featured very familiar business terms, namely ‘*computer*’, ‘*bank*’, ‘*security system*’, ‘*email*’ and a date, ‘*24<sup>th</sup> June*’. Most experienced little difficulty spelling these words, and if errors were made, it was usually because candidates opted for the distractor rather than the key intended.

Some candidates struggled with the spelling of the word ‘*design*’ on Question 17 but had clearly identified the correct answer ‘*web design*’. Some alternative spellings were accepted. Question 19 proved challenging, although the key, ‘*turnover*’, was a very high frequency word, and one which candidates at this level would be expected to know. Again, the distractor, ‘*rental costs*’, proved very tempting, and misled quite a few.

### **Part 4**

Candidate performance was again mostly good on this part, although many candidates found the first question, Question 23, quite demanding. The key was B, with the answer given in the words ‘*in general, the price of clothing is going down, so the market is extremely competitive at all levels*’. However, a number of candidates wrongly opted for A, although this was clearly ruled out with the words ‘*some people say this pricing policy is responsible for the drop, but I don’t believe that’s so*’.

A similar problem arose in question 27. The key was A, given in the words ‘*that figure seems to be on the increase, in the furniture division*’. But some weaker candidates opted for B, presumably because they failed to catch the opening words of the sentence ‘*I don’t expect online clothing sales to rise dramatically though*’.

Performance on other questions in Part 4 was remarkably consistent, with the exception of Question 26, which proved rather less challenging than the others.

## **• 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 vowel sounds, which appeared in Question 14 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 decide whether an answer in the singular or plural is required. (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. It is also extremely important that candidates read the question carefully and make sure that their answer matches what is said in the recording.

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

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

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

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

1. Please describe your situation (e.g. EFL/ESOL teacher, Director of Studies, Examinations Officer, Centre Exams Manager).
  
2. Have you prepared candidates for BEC 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.