

BEC

Vantage

Examination Report

May 2005



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Business English Certificate Vantage

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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Paper 1 - Reading	3
Paper 2 - Writing	7
Paper 3 - Listening	12
Paper 4 - Speaking	17
Feedback Form	22

WEBSITE REFERENCE

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

www.CambridgeESOL.org

INTRODUCTION

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

• **Candidature**

The May 2005 session was sat in 19 countries, with the largest entry being from China. The profile of the candidature in China was different in many respects from that in the rest of the world.

In China, 91% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 8% between 26 and 40 years old, with 75% being female. Just over 30% of the candidates attended exam preparation classes. 51% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career and 49% stated that it was for further study of English.

In countries other than China, 61% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 32% between 26 and 40 years old, with 56% being female. Exam preparation classes were attended by 90% of candidates. 74% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career; 19% said that it was for further study of English.

• **Grading**

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

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

The overall grades are set using the following information:

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

BEC Vantage has three passing grades: A, B and C, and two failing grades: D (Narrow fail) and E. The overall pass rate for the May 2005 examination was 37%. The pass rate in China was 32%, compared to 74% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 6% of candidates were awarded a grade 'B' (4% in the case of China, and 20% for the rest of the world), and 1% a grade 'A' (less than 1% in the case of China, and 10% for the rest of the world).

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

• **Special Consideration**

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

- **Irregular Conduct**

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

- **Notification of Results**

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

- **Useful documentation**

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

- *Regulations* (produced annually, for information on dates, etc.)
- *BEC Handbook* (for detailed information on the examination and sample materials)
- *Examination Report* (produced once a year)
- *Past Paper Pack* (available approximately 10 weeks after each examination session, including Examination Papers 1–4, tape/CD and tapescript for Paper 3, keys, sample Speaking test material and Paper 2 mark schemes and sample scripts)
- *BEC Speaking Test Video* (for information on the Speaking test including worksheets for candidates)

In addition, online teaching resources for BEC Vantage are now available (visit the website: http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teach/bec/bec_vantage/). 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 VANTAGE READING

PART	Main Skill Focus	Input	Response	Number of questions
1	Reading – scanning and gist	One longer or four shorter informational texts (approx. 250 – 350 words in total)	Matching	7
2	Reading – understanding text structure	Single text: article, report, etc. with sentence level gaps (text plus 7 option sentences approx. 450 – 550 words in total)	Matching	5
3	Reading for gist and specific information	Single text (approx. 450 – 550 words)	4-option multiple choice	6
4	Reading – vocabulary and structure	Single informational text with lexical gaps (text including gapped words approx. 200 – 300 words)	4-option multiple choice cloze	15
5	Reading – understanding sentence structure / error identification	Short text (identification of additional unnecessary words in text of approx. 150 – 200 words)	Proof-reading	12

The BEC Vantage Reading Paper is based on five texts, with 45 questions of varied types (multiple choice, multiple matching and proof-reading). One mark 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 of this paper is a matching task containing a text divided into four sections (or four short texts on a related theme). Although the context of each text or section is similar, there will be information that is particular to each. Candidates are presented with seven statements and are expected to match each statement to the relevant section.

Part 2 is a matching task, comprising a text that has had six sentences removed from it and a set of seven sentences labelled A–G. Candidates are required to fill each gap with the sentence which they think fits in terms of meaning and structure. There is one example at the beginning. This part tests understanding of text structure as well as meaning and candidates are tested on a variety of cohesive features with both a backward and a forward reference, sometimes going beyond sentence level.

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

Part 4 is a multiple choice cloze test with fifteen gaps, most of which test lexical items, and may focus on correct word choice, lexical collocations and fixed phrases.

In Part 5, candidates are presented with a text of 12 numbered lines. They have to identify words (no more than one in any line) which have been incorrectly inserted into the text. However, some lines are correct.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Part 1

This was one of the less demanding parts of the paper and candidates generally coped well with the task. Question 7 proved to be the most difficult. The correct answer is C but some candidates wrongly chose D. The question targets the last sentence of C and the reference to a bank loan being *'refinanced at a lower interest rate later'*. It may be that candidates were attracted to the reference in D to monitoring acquisitions closely *'for at least two years'*. However, there is no mention here of *'terms'* being renegotiated.

Question 6 targeted the last sentence of A. Here it states that it is important to do *'thorough research'*. It also states that it may become necessary to *'walk away from a deal'* if difficulties arise. Some candidates who incorrectly chose C may have been attracted to the first two sentences of this section. While C clearly refers to the idea of *'investing some effort'* in the acquisition, it does not make any mention of the need to *'withdraw'* from negotiations.

Part 2

This was one of the more challenging tasks on the paper, with candidates finding Questions 8 and 9 the most difficult.

The answer to Question 8 is E. Option E refers to *'only a finite number of consumers in any target market'* and this links back to the reference in the text to *'target the right people'*. There is also a forward link between E and the text after the gap. The point is made in E that *'there is no need to overwhelm prospects with competing messages'* and this is developed in the text after 8 with the reference: *'it is better to simplify the process'*. Some candidates incorrectly chose B for gap 8. This would not create a logical development. The text above the gap talks about *'cutting down'* on spending by targeting the right people. Option B, on the other hand, states that this style of marketing would lead to increased spending. It may be that candidates were simply matching the mention of *'marketing budgets'* in B with the reference in the text before the gap to the *'above-the-line spend'*. It is important that candidates process the whole text and do not rely on matching isolated references.

Another question which candidates found challenging was 9. The correct answer is B, but a lot of candidates chose C, which is a distractor and does not fit anywhere. While the beginning of option C may be attractive for gap 9, it can be ruled out by the reference at the end to *'companies such as these'*. No examples of *'small and struggling companies'* have been given prior to the gap and therefore it is not possible for C to fit here.

Part 3

This was the least demanding part of the paper and was handled well by most candidates.

In Question 13, the correct answer is B but quite a few candidates chose C. The question stem asks what improved communications have enabled companies to do. The answer is located in the second sentence of the first paragraph: *'Thanks to sophisticated IT and communications systems, businesses can now market their products on a truly global scale.'* In other words, as stated in option B, they can *'expand beyond their domestic markets'*. Although the first paragraph mentions *'increased competition'* and the need to *'keep up with competitors'*, it does not say that improved communications have enabled companies to perform better than competitors (as stated in C).

Question 18 refers to the need for companies to do business in the language of the country they are operating in, and the correct answer is A. This requires some processing of the whole of the last paragraph but the answer is mainly located in the last two sentences: *'If these companies want to... achieve success... they must... speak the local language. If not, someone else will.'* However, quite a few candidates chose C. It is possible that these candidates did not read the text carefully. Although there is a reference in the second sentence of the last paragraph to *'clients demanding that business be conducted in their mother tongue'*, it is also stated that companies are *'not yet faced'* with this demand. Option C refers to *'clients' current expectations'* and is therefore wrong.

Part 4

This was one of the less demanding parts of the paper and candidates generally coped well with the task, although some questions proved more demanding than others.

The correct answer to 19 was B, but quite a few candidates were attracted to A or D. The text describes a company's financial results and although it is primarily an '*agricultural and garden equipment group*', it also has '*distribution and fuel interests*'. It would not be appropriate in this context, when giving details of an additional commercial undertaking, to refer to '*fuel commitments*' or '*fuel benefits*'. It is important that candidates consider the precise meaning of the words when choosing from a set of options.

The correct answer to Question 28 is D, but candidates also chose options A and B, and to a lesser extent C. In order for '*inform*' or '*notify*' to be correct, the sentence would need to be: '*I am delighted to inform/notify you of the continued development of...*'. '*Report*' does not need to be followed by a preposition and is correct in the sentence given. Fewer candidates chose C. This is incorrect since it would need to be followed by 'on'. Candidates need to consider the grammatical environment when they are selecting an option, as well as its meaning.

Part 5

This task, which focuses on grammatical accuracy, was one of the more challenging parts of the test. Questions 34 and 35 proved to be the most difficult for candidates. In line 34, the extra word is '*the*', but quite a few candidates identified this as a correct line. This is a general reference to meetings and does not require an article.

Although line 35 is a correct line, many candidates identified '*quite*' or '*already*' as the extra word. It is important that candidates do not regard a word that is superfluous as grammatically incorrect or not fitting in with the meaning of the text. While it is possible to delete '*quite*' and/or '*already*' from the sentence, they do not make the sentence incorrect.

Line 41 also caused some problems for candidates. Here the incorrect word is '*of*' but many candidates put '*are*' as their answer. Candidates need to read the next line to realise that '*are*' is not an extra word. A passive structure is needed in line 41 and this becomes clear in the clause that appears on the next line. Some candidates may have been confused between '*most of them*', when '*of*' is correct, and '*most of people's*', when it is not.

• Recommendations for candidate preparation

In addition to specific examination practice, students should be encouraged to read as widely as possible. The texts that appear in the test are drawn from magazines, newspapers and books, and it is important that students are familiar with these text types. Whenever possible, students should be given a range of reading purposes (retrieving information, getting the 'gist', understanding detail, etc.) since this will prepare them for the different task types that occur on the paper.

Part 5 was one of the more difficult parts of the paper and it may be a task type that candidates need additional practice in. It has a grammatical focus and candidates may need to do more tasks that focus on accuracy. Candidates should also remember that the extra word has to be wrong and not simply superfluous.

Part 2 was equally challenging. With gapped texts, candidates need to read the text before and after the gap carefully. It is also important when choosing an option that candidates process the whole text rather than trying to match individual words.

Although candidates did not perform badly in Part 3, they may benefit from practice identifying and locating main ideas in a paragraph or section. It is also important for candidates to read the questions carefully. The task is testing detailed understanding and three of the options A–D will say something similar to the text, but not exactly the same.

Candidates did not have too many difficulties with Part 4. However, it would be useful for them to increase their range of business vocabulary, particularly in the area of collocations, fixed phrases and phrasal verbs. They also need to consider how the grammatical environment limits their choice.

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

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|--------------|--|
| DO | pay attention to the complete meaning of the sentences in Part 1. |
| DO | read the whole text in Part 2 first and try to predict what kind of information is missing from each of the gaps, as working on the extracts before reading the base text is potentially confusing. |
| DO | look very carefully at the pronouns that occur in the extracts in Part 2. They must refer correctly to the nouns that precede and/or follow the gap in the base text. |
| DO | regularly review to match your choices in Part 2. As you work through the task, difficulty in finding a particular extract may indicate that you have already used it for an earlier gap. Always leave enough time to double check answers against the text. |
| DO | pay attention to the general theme of the paragraphs in Part 3. |
| DO | read the text and questions very carefully in Part 3. Remember any of the options A, B, C or D may say something very similar in meaning to the text, but not exactly the same. |
| DO | read the question or stem very carefully in Part 3. It may be that all of the options occur in the text but only one of them is correct with a particular stem or question. |
| DO | keep vocabulary lists and try to make use of words that are new. This will be particularly useful for Part 4. |
| DO | look carefully at the sentences in which the vocabulary items in Part 5 occur. Is the word chosen followed by a certain preposition or grammatical structure? Does it collocate with the surrounding words? |
| DO | remember that the extra word in Part 5 has to be wrong and not just superfluous. |
| DO | write the whole word in Part 5 in capital letters and not a mixture of lower and upper case. |
| DON'T | match words alone in Part 1. There are usually some similarities between sections and you need to make sure that your choice matches the complete meaning of the question. |
| DON'T | ignore the need for introductory adverts or phrases in the Part 2 extracts to link with ideas that go before and after the gaps. For example, 'however' must be preceded by a contrasting idea. |
| DON'T | forget the need for tenses in the Part 2 extracts to fit logically with those already present in the base text. |
| DON'T | choose more than one letter for any of the answers in Parts 1–4. |
| DON'T | write more than one word for the answers in Part 5. |

BEC VANTAGE WRITING

PART	Functions/Communicative Task	Input	Response	Register
1	e.g. giving instructions, explaining a development, asking for comments, requesting information, agreeing to requests	Rubric only (plus layout of output text type)	Internal communication (medium may be note, message, memo or email) (40–50 words)	Neutral/informal
2	<p>Correspondence: e.g. explaining, apologising, reassuring, complaining</p> <p>Report: describing, summarising</p> <p>Proposal: describing, summarising, recommending, persuading</p>	One or more pieces of input from: business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or email), internal communication (medium may be note, memo or email), notice, advert, graphs, charts, etc. (plus layout if output is fax or email)	Business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or email) or short report or proposal (medium may be memo or email) (120–140 words)	Neutral/formal

For BEC Vantage, 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 40 and 50 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 120 and 140 words. This task involves the processing of one or two short input texts, which may contain visual or graphic material, and which have 'handwritten' notes on them.

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

In this part, candidates were required to specify a piece of equipment their company should buy, suggest how the equipment could benefit the company and then explain why a prompt order should be made. Overall the majority of candidates found the question straightforward and answered it well. However, a few candidates reproduced the language provided in the scenario at the beginning of the task, with a few minor alterations, rather than attempting to explain the context in their own words. Candidates should remember that they will be rewarded for producing language rather than lifting it from the question paper.

For point 1, candidates had to name a piece of equipment. This was usually a piece of office equipment such as a photocopier, a fax machine or a computer. A relatively small number of candidates failed to name the equipment and so were penalised. Furthermore, items such as shoes or plastic flowers, which could not be regarded as office equipment, were not accepted. On the whole, this part of the question presented few problems for candidates and was answered well.

Point 2 was generally handled well, with many candidates linking their response to point 1. Candidates mentioned benefits such as improving performance and increasing productivity, *'to show information to clients and staff efficiently'*; *'the quality of the copies and the productivity of our staff could be improved'*. Others referred to a benefit that involved replacing old or broken equipment *'it always breaks and causes a lot of inconvenience'*. There were very few misinterpretations of *'benefit'* and the vast majority of candidates wrote about an advantage of new equipment.

In point 3 candidates had to give a reason for ordering promptly. Many candidates dealt with this well, suggesting that action was required quickly because of a discount or special offer: *'20% discount before 1st June so we need a quick decision'*. Others referred to a high demand: *'it will be very popular so...'*; *'due to a shortage of stock...'*. However, this point was also the one omitted the most and candidates need to be reminded to ensure they cover all three points in their answers.

In addition, candidates should remember that in Part 1 they are required to write concisely and to avoid over-length answers. Where the delivery medium is a memo or an email, candidates need not include to/from/date/subject details. Also, since twice as many marks are available for the Part 2 writing task as for the Part 1 task, it is important for candidates to allocate the time spent on each part appropriately. The task was an internal email and the majority of candidates produced a consistently neutral or informal register.

Part 2

In this part of the test, candidates had to produce a short report for their line manager giving details of problems with a supplier and recommending solutions. This task was straightforward and was handled well by most candidates. However, some candidates had difficulties with one or two of the points or failed to address them and a few candidates misinterpreted the task and wrote to the supplier, Sorenson, to complain about their service.

The five points that candidates have to deal with appear on the task as 'handwritten' notes and candidates should be aware that the points do not appear on the page in a particular order. When planning their answers, therefore, candidates need to decide on the order in which they will cover the points.

In point 1, candidates were required to compare Sorenson's costs with those of other suppliers. Many candidates used a comparative structure, e.g. *'Sorenson is more expensive than other suppliers'* and linked this successfully to the second point. However, this point was missed by a relatively large number of candidates, including strong candidates who dealt successfully with the other four points.

In point 2, candidates had to recommend a course of action and a range of recommendations were produced, *'make an appointment for a face-to-face meeting with Sorenson'*; *'we should cancel the contract'*; *'warn Sorenson that if it doesn't improve we will...'*. There were also some more general

statements from candidates, *'we should make a great effort to improve...'; 'look for another supplier'*, and these were also accepted. Good candidates managed to combine points 1 and 2 and dealt with these at the end of their reports.

In point 3, candidates were required to indicate that the number of late deliveries had risen. This was a relatively straightforward point that required little expansion. However, some candidates struggled to produce accurate language to refer to figures, *'it rise up to 24 times'; 'for 24 times'*., whilst stronger candidates managed to handle the language well and stated that the total number of late deliveries this year was greater than in the previous year.

In point 4, candidates had to explain the effect unsatisfactory product quality had on the business. This was probably the most challenging point and strong candidates addressed it in a variety of ways, *'this will affect our sales turnover because our customers will lose confidence in us'; 'makes it difficult for us to maintain the quality of our products'; 'our customers no longer trust our product'; 'hurts our company image'*.

Some weaker candidates struggled in their attempts to link the figure '17' with the concept of unsatisfactory quality and its effect on the business, e.g. *'this problem's number is 17'*.

In point 5, candidates were required to indicate that all future invoices from suppliers should be checked. This was a straightforward point that required very little expansion. A few candidates stated that in future all of Sorenson's invoices would need checking, and this was accepted, although candidates who indicated that invoices had been checked in the past were penalised since it ignored the important reference to the future.

The required register in Part 2 was neutral or formal and most candidates achieved this successfully. Some inserted letter features inappropriately, which resulted in task penalties. With the information in the table, some candidates focused on the figures instead of dealing purely with the five content points, e.g. commenting on the figures when it was not necessary. In so doing, candidates wasted valuable time and ran the risk of overlooking a point they were required to deal with.

Stronger candidates managed to deal with the content points coherently, in some cases combining them and demonstrating good control of language and linking devices. Many candidates used headings appropriately (Introduction/Findings/Conclusions/ Recommendations) which helped their reports have a good structure and layout, but sometimes the sign-posting became over-elaborate, which affected the fluency and the continuity of their writing.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Part 1

The writing task in Part 1 tests whether candidates can write concisely and convey specific information to a designated target reader. Being able to write concisely means first gaining a clear understanding of the purpose of the message and what it seeks to achieve. Students need to practise reading tasks very carefully and identifying the key content points. They also need to check that they have covered every one of the bulleted points adequately, because the most frequent reason for penalising answers is omission.

Sometimes in Part 1 candidates are tempted to simply copy information from the question paper into their answers, rather than produce language of their own. Although some expansion and evidence of range is desirable, care must be taken to avoid irrelevance and over-length answers, so students need to develop skills in expressing important information in a few words. Students can be aided in this by learning and using precise business-related vocabulary, which will avoid paraphrasing and also produce texts which appear more authentic.

Students should also remember that they do not have to tackle the points one by one, but should think of the whole message and understand what the points mean in context. Answers should combine the language points succinctly and effectively using appropriate linking devices and reordering if necessary. It is also important to think about the register and tone of the answer depending on who the target reader is and what is being said.

Part 2

As in Part 1, students should be encouraged to read the question very carefully and carry out what is required, addressing all the necessary content points and keeping to the task. The best practice is to read the whole question before writing anything, paying special attention to where exactly the arrows from the handwritten notes point. Students need to keep checking that they have covered every point. It may be useful if they tick the circled points on their exam paper once they have dealt with them. In class, they could practise reading the question for five minutes and then cover it up and try to recall the information that they have to supply.

When students analyse the notes they should try to be inventive with the information that they need to supply, but not go into excessive detail as this will waste time and effort. If there are tables and figures, it is not necessary to analyse every detail in writing, but use them as a basis for comment. In this case, the figures were the basis for explanation and recommendation. In addition, students should pay close attention to the tone and implications of the notes. *'More than last year'* refers to the increase in the number of late deliveries and is clearly a negative reference.

One important consideration is the creation of grammatically sound sentences from the notes and information presented. Many students, for example, struggled with pronouns for Sorenson: *'we should stop doing business with it'*. However, companies are often referred to with a plural pronoun. It would be a good idea for students to look at different types of visually presented information and notes from newspapers, magazines, journals and textbooks, and practise how they should render them grammatically in their answers. This also helps them avoid lifting by making them think carefully about the information and how they can adapt and use it in their answers.

For any report, clear organisation is very important and useful work can be done in class on report layout and structure, with attention paid to paragraphing and sub-headings. It is also clear that students need to consider ways of ensuring a neutral tone in their reports, being careful to avoid letter features, such as 'Dear Sir' and 'Yours sincerely', as well as overly personal references.

• DOs and DON'Ts for BEC VANTAGE WRITING

- DO** read the question thoroughly and underline the important parts.
- DO** check that you have included all the content points in Parts 1 and 2.
- DO** expand the points in Part 2 with relevant ideas and information.
- DO** make sure you include important information in a grammatically correct way.
- DO** use a range of business words and expressions.
- DO** write clearly so that the examiner can read your answer.
- DO** keep to the word limit.
- DO** keep to the correct task format and avoid mixing them, e.g. report with letter features
- DO** check each answer carefully at the end.

- DON'T** add too much information to Part 1 answers.
- DON'T** 'lift' too much language from the question paper.
- DON'T** misspell key words which appear on the question paper.
- DON'T** misinterpret or mix up information contained in the question.
- DON'T** use words and structures repetitively.
- DON'T** over-analyse visually presented information.
- DON'T** mix formal and informal language.

BEC VANTAGE LISTENING

PART	Main Skill Focus	Input	Response	Number of questions
1	Listening for writing short answers	Three telephone conversations or messages	Gap filling	12
2	Listening; identifying topic, context, function, etc.	Short monologue; two sections of five 'snippets' each	Multiple matching	10
3	Listening	One extended conversation or monologue: interview, discussion, presentation, etc.	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. The score obtained represents 25% of the candidate's overall mark.

There are three parts to the test and a range of text and task types is represented. All parts of the recording are heard twice. All instructions, rubrics and pauses are recorded onto the tape/CD, as is the ten minutes copying up time at the end.

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

In Part 1, candidates hear three conversations or answering machine messages, and for each one, they have to complete a gapped text with one or two words or a number in each gap. This part of the test concentrates on the retrieval of factual information and it is important for candidates to listen carefully using the prompts on their question paper in order to identify the missing information. Answers to this part are rarely a simple matter of dictation, and some reformulation of the prompt material will be required in order to locate the correct answer.

Part 2 is divided into two sections. Each section has the same format: candidates hear five short monologues and have to match each monologue to a set of options A–H. In each section, the eight options will form a coherent set and the overall theme or topic will be clearly stated in the task rubric. The two sections will always test different areas and so if the first section focuses on, say, topics, the second section will focus on something else, such as functions. In this part of the Listening test, candidates are being tested on their global listening skills and also on their ability to infer, extract gist and understand main ideas. In order to answer the questions successfully, they will need to work out the answer by developing ideas, and refining these as the recording is heard. It will not be possible to 'word match' and candidates should not expect to hear such overt clues. However, there will always be a 'right' answer and candidates are not expected to opt for the 'best' answer.

In Part 3, a longer text is heard, usually lasting approximately four minutes. The text will typically be an interview, conversation or discussion with two or more speakers, or possibly a presentation or report with one speaker. There are eight, three-option multiple choice questions that focus on details and main ideas in the text. There may be questions on opinions and feelings, but these will be relatively straightforward and will not require candidates to remember long or complex pieces of information.

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Part 1

Conversation One: Candidates generally performed well in this task. Questions 3 and 4 were the most challenging, with some weaker candidates failing to make sure their answer fitted the prompt. For example, in Question 3, some candidates gave *'photocopy feedback'* as their answer, although this was the complete request not a completion of the notes. This meant that the request for copying was repeated and it led to the nonsensical *'please make copies of the photocopy feedback'*. Inaccurate spelling was another common reason for error, especially in Question 4 where some candidates wrote *'globe'* or *'partneship'* for *'global'* and *'partnership'*.

Conversation Two: Candidates found this task more challenging than the other tasks in this part with Questions 5, 6 and 8 causing particular difficulty. Weaker candidates failed to process the information adequately and so were misled by the distractors writing *'lined'* (the paper that was received last month) for *'headed'* in Question 5, *'lunch'* (where Sarah Williams is at the moment) for *'training session'* in Question 6 and *'invoice'* for *'instalments'* in Question 8. In Question 8, although an invoice is mentioned it is not a method of payment and so candidates who wrote *'invoice'* had failed to process the prompt correctly. Also, candidates who had the right answer in Question 6 failed to spell *'session'* correctly, writing *'cession'* instead. Candidates need to ensure that they read the prompts carefully before completing their answers.

Conversation Three: Some candidates tackled this task reasonably well although Questions 9 and 10 were more demanding. In Question 10 some candidates failed to process the information sufficiently to fit the prompt and wrote *'human resource'* rather than *'human resources'*. In addition, some candidates misspelt *'human'*, writing *'humen'* instead.

Part 2

Section One: In general, candidates successfully processed and interpreted what they heard in this part. However, several candidates found Questions 15 and 17 challenging because they appeared to recognise a topic or word in the recording, without understanding what was said about it. For instance, in Question 17, the speaker says *'that means getting more produced better and faster'*: a significant proportion of the weaker candidates chose C as their answer, presumably because it includes the word *'produced'*.

Question 15 was not quite as demanding, but nevertheless some weaker candidates chose H, probably because of references to *'streamlined'* and *'control'*, although these are mentioned in the context of *'operating from one location instead of four'* in order to reduce costs. *'Stock control'* is not mentioned.

Section Two: This section was done reasonably well, although Questions 20, 21 and 22 did cause difficulty, making this one of the more challenging tasks on the paper. Again, the most common mistakes involved failing to process what was said. In each case, candidates appeared to select the option that contained a word they recognised from the recording rather than processing what they heard. Weak candidates chose option C for Question 20 (having heard *'budget'* in the text); F or H for Question 21 (having heard *'figures'* or *'sales'* in the text); E, F or H for Question 22 (having heard *'investment'*, *'figures'* or *'sales'* in the text).

In tasks focusing on the speaker's purpose, candidates should take particular care to consider the verbs in the options.

Part 3

Performance on this part was good, with Questions 24, 27 and 28 proving the most difficult. In Question 24, the correct answer is C. Although the speaker discusses Trident supplying new markets, this is in the context of external expectations, part of the speaker's beliefs about the parent company's wishes. Candidates needed to process the stem (i.e. what Gareth thinks) as well as the information about the parent company and listen for a clue in the recording that matched this stem i.e. *'it seems ...'*

In Question 27, the answer is A, reflecting *'it's their chance to look at all the equipment there and suggest how Trident could supply the company's needs better'* in the interview. Although the Parts Services Department and customer waiting time are mentioned as problems, they do not relate to the service engineers mentioned in the stem. Again, candidates need to make sure that the answer fits with the stem of the question.

In Question 28, B is the correct answer, but weaker candidates selected both A and C in equal proportions. This exemplifies a common mistake, that weaker candidates tend to choose answers on the basis of a word being used in both the option and the text, without fully processing what is said. The text relating to this question includes the words *'policy'* and *'top management'* whereas employees are referred to as *'staff'*. Weaker candidates seem to have selected A or C based on spotting a similar word in the text rather than processing the information.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

Part 1

In preparing for this part of the test, candidates need to be able to write words and phrases quickly and accurately. It is important that candidates' handwriting is legible and that the 20 seconds provided at the end of this part is used to check spelling.

Candidates should practise trying to predict what will come next in the listening, using the rubric, forms or notes on the question paper to help them. They should look at the words before and after each gap, and think about what kind of information is missing, in terms of both semantics and grammar. The use of pre-listening tasks in classwork will be of great benefit in raising awareness of this, and candidates should learn to make effective use of the time available for reading task instructions and questions to ascertain what is required. Answers to this part are rarely a simple matter of dictation, so candidates should be aware that the prompt in the task is likely to be expressed differently in the text.

If candidates are unsure of an answer, they may find it helpful to write down possible answers the first time they listen to the recording and then make up their minds during the second listening. They should be made aware that the answer must fit the prompt grammatically and semantically. However, candidates should not spend long struggling with a question, as this may prevent them from answering subsequent questions.

As candidates are expected to write down only the exact words or number spoken, attempts at re-phrasing may well lead to the answer being marked as incorrect. For the same reason, candidates should be discouraged from writing down any additional information.

Although minor spelling errors are accepted, the words or phrases tested in this task are ones which candidates can reasonably be expected to spell correctly, and therefore candidates should make good use of the allotted time to check their answers.

Part 2

For this part of the test, candidates should again be encouraged to think carefully about the context and to use the preparation time to read the options and consider what they might be hearing, e.g. how each option might be expressed or exemplified, and the vocabulary that might be used. Candidates should consider the whole of each text, and not choose an answer simply because one or two identical words occur both in the recording and in an option.

Candidates should be advised to make good use of the second listening to check their answers, even if they have answered every question first time round. It may even be necessary to change more than one answer if an error is detected, because one incorrect answer may have a knock-on effect on other questions.

Part 3

For multiple-choice question tasks, candidates should be aware that they have 45 seconds to read the questions before they hear the recording, and that this time should be used to identify those aspects they are to be tested on. It is very important that they try to read all the stems of the questions before they listen to get a feel for the focus of the whole text. In addition, candidates should pay particular attention to understanding the stems of the questions so that they can focus on finding the answer as they listen. This is because, although a particular option may be true according to what is said in the piece, it is not necessarily the correct answer to the question that has been asked.

Candidates should be aware that all three options in multiple-choice questions will include ideas and information from the text, but only one (the key) will combine with the question stem to reflect that exact meaning expressed in the text.

- **DOs and DON'Ts for BEC VANTAGE LISTENING**

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| DO | use the full time allowed to read the questions carefully before you hear each piece, and underline key words and phrases in the instructions and questions. If you familiarise yourself with what is being asked, you are more likely to focus precisely on the points being tested. For example, in Part 1, this will help you anticipate what kind of answer is required. |
| DO | write no more than two words and/or a number in Part 1. |
| DO | write the exact word(s) or figure(s) which are heard in Part 1. |
| DO | use your time efficiently to check that the answers in Part 1 make sense with the prompt material. |
| DO | remember that any error discovered in Part 2 when hearing the piece for the second time may have an effect on the other answers. |
| DO | concentrate on gaining an in-depth understanding of what the speakers say, rather than only a superficial one, particularly in Parts 2 and 3. |
| DO | make sure that in Part 3 you choose an option that is not only true according to what is said, but also true in answer to the question. |
| DO | answer every question, even if you have to guess, as no marks are lost for wrong answers. |
| DO | take particular care to transfer your answers correctly to the answer sheet. |
| DON'T | worry if you are unsure of the answers the first time you hear each piece. |
| DON'T | try to write a more complicated word or phrase than the one heard in Part 1. |
| DON'T | spend too much time on a question that you are having difficulty with, as you may miss the next question. |

BEC VANTAGE SPEAKING

PART	Format/Content	Time	Interaction Focus
1	<p>Conversation between the interlocutor and each candidate</p> <p>Giving personal information. Talking about present circumstances, past experiences and future plans, expressing opinion, speculating, etc.</p>	About 3 minutes	The interlocutor encourages the candidates to give information about themselves and to express personal opinions.
2	<p>A 'mini-presentation' by each candidate on a business theme</p> <p>Organising a larger unit of discourse; giving information and expressing and justifying opinions</p>	About 6 minutes	The candidates are given prompts which generate a short talk on a business-related topic.
3	<p>Two-way conversation between candidates followed by further prompting from the interlocutor</p> <p>Expressing and justifying opinions, speculating, comparing and contrasting, agreeing and disagreeing, etc.</p>	About 5 minutes	The candidates are presented with a prompt to start a discussion on a business-related topic. The interlocutor extends the discussion with prompts on related topics.

The BEC Vantage Speaking test is conducted with pairs of candidates by two Oral Examiners: an Interlocutor and an Assessor. The test takes approximately 14 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, interests 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 three topics and has one minute to prepare an individual presentation lasting approximately one minute. After each candidate has spoken, their partner asks a question about what has been said. In Part 2, candidates are being tested on their ability to organise a talk using language accurately and appropriately.

Part 3 of the test is a discussion between the candidates based on a topic given to them by the interlocutor. Candidates discuss the topic for about three minutes, and are then asked questions related to the main theme. In Part 3, candidates are being tested on their ability to interact appropriately using appropriate functional language and strategies.

- **Assessment**

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

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

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Candidates' performance for May 2005 was very similar to that of the same session in 2004. Overall, a lower mean score was achieved by candidates from China compared with candidates from the rest of the world. Analysis of data reveals that candidates had no particular problems with any specific task and that the highest average mark was for Pronunciation, with lower average scores for Grammar and Vocabulary and Discourse Management.

Feedback from oral examiners has been generally positive. Candidates who have not met each other before the Speaking test do not need to feel concerned as evidence suggests that this does not affect performance. In order to provide evidence of their language ability, it is important that candidates' should take advantage of the opportunities provided to speak and interact with their partner.

Part 1

This part of the test gives the examiners their first impression of the candidates and it is therefore important that candidates speak about themselves and their work or studies in appropriate detail – relatively short responses suffice in this part due to the limited time available. Candidates are advised not to rehearse answers to questions that they think may be asked as this often leads to inappropriate responses.

Part 2

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

When choosing the second of the three topics (designed for those with some general business experience), good candidates will use examples of their own experience, or someone else's where they have no previous work experience. Weaker candidates and those with little experience are advised not to base their talk on the third topic (which assumes knowledge of a particular area of business), as they may experience difficulty with the subject matter and in using suitable language. Therefore, they are better off speaking about the first choice requiring little or no experience of work.

Part 3

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

Candidates should make full use of the time available, starting their discussion when they have

absorbed the information fully, and finishing only when the examiner asks them to. They should not feel concerned when they are asked to stop as this will simply mean they have talked for the allotted time.

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

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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| DO | familiarise yourself with the form, function and procedures for all parts of the test. |
| DO | take every opportunity to practise your English in groups and pairs, both inside and outside the classroom before the test, particularly in a business environment, if possible. |
| DO | take opportunities to show what you are capable of and try to produce an extended sample of language for the examiner to assess. |
| DO | listen carefully to instructions and questions asked throughout the test and focus your answers appropriately. |
| DO | ask for repetition of instructions if you are unclear about what to do. |
| DO | show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking and respond appropriately to your partner's utterances. |
| DO | try to avoid long silences and frequent pauses. |
| DO | be prepared to initiate discussion in Part 3, as well as respond to what your partner has said. |
| DO | speak clearly and loudly enough for the examiners to hear. |
| DON'T | prepare long responses in advance, as it is unlikely that questions will be answered appropriately. |
| DON'T | try to give your views during your partner's long turn. |
| DON'T | try to dominate your partner or interrupt in an abrupt way. |
| DON'T | make frequent pauses and hesitations during the interaction or during your own turn. |
| DON'T | worry if you disagree with your partner. As long as you are polite and not overbearing, this is all part of Interactive Communication. |
| DON'T | worry about being interrupted by the examiner. For administrative reasons, it is important that tests do not overrun. |

FEEDBACK FORM

BEC Vantage Examination Report – May 2005

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

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

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

Fax: +44 1223 460278

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

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

3. Do you plan to prepare candidates for BEC Vantage 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.