

# BEC

## Vantage

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### Examination Report

May 2006



UNIVERSITY *of* CAMBRIDGE  
ESOL Examinations

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English for Speakers of Other Languages

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University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations  
1 Hills Road  
Cambridge  
CB1 2EU United Kingdom

Tel. +44 1223 553355  
Fax. +44 1223 460278  
e-mail [ESOL@CambridgeESOL.org](mailto:ESOL@CambridgeESOL.org)  
[www.CambridgeESOL.org](http://www.CambridgeESOL.org)

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# **Business English Certificate Vantage**

## **Examination Report**

**May 2006**

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

### • **Candidature**

The May 2006 session was sat in 20 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, 90% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 9% between 26 and 40 years old, with 76% being female. 29% of the candidates attended exam preparation classes. 54% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career and 47% stated that it was for further study of English.

In countries other than China, 60% of candidates were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 31% between 26 and 40 years old, with 58% being female. Exam preparation classes were attended by 92% of candidates. 56% of candidates said that their reason for taking the exam was to help in their job or career; 14% said that it was for further study of English.

### • **Grading**

Grading took place during June 2006, approximately five weeks after the examination was taken.

The four BEC 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 2006 examination was 39%. The pass rate in China was 34%, compared to 77% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 5% of candidates were awarded a grade 'B' (2% in the case of China, and 24% for the rest of the world), and 1% a grade 'A' (less than 1% in the case of China, and 9% 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 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 Vantage are now available (visit the website: [http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teach/bec/bec\\_vantage/](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:

Cambridge ESOL Information  
1 Hills Road  
Cambridge  
CB1 2EU  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 1223 553355  
Fax: +44 1223 553078  
Email: [ESOLinfo@CambridgeESOL.org](mailto:ESOLinfo@CambridgeESOL.org)  
Website: [www.CambridgeESOL.org](http://www.CambridgeESOL.org)

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 the least challenging part of the paper and candidates coped very well with the task.

Candidates generally found Question 3 straightforward, correctly matching it to section A and the failure to *'establish contracts that define the ways in which the two companies will work alongside one another'*.

However, some candidates found Question 2 challenging. This targets section D and the reference to *'companies should be careful not to lose sight of the original rationale for outsourcing'*. Some candidates incorrectly matched it with B. They may have been attracted to the third sentence in B where it states, *'they need to remember that, at the same time, outsourcing involves gaining people'*. This is not a reference to the *'initial reason'* for the outsourcing project; it describes a possible outcome of the outsourcing project.

Another question that some candidates found challenging was Question 5. The correct answer is B, which matches with *'It is critical to have an individual in charge to check that the external and internal business operations work together'*. The candidates who gave A as their answer may have believed it referred to *'the added responsibility of managing new ways of working'*. However, this part of the text describes the *'responsibility'* of companies to manage the integration process. It does not refer to an individual being made responsible for the process. It is important that candidates do not approach this task at word level. They will need to process text at clause level and above in order to find the correct answer.

### **Part 2**

This was the most challenging task on the paper, with candidates finding questions 8 and 11 the most difficult.

In Question 8 the correct answer is C but a lot of candidates chose B. This is the distractor and does not fit in any of the gaps. Although B is attractive because of the time references (the link between *'was required'* in B and *'That's no longer the case'* in the text after the gap), it does not fit in terms of meaning at sentence and paragraph level. The text describes how today the decisions of HR managers have an impact across the entire business (they do not have a *'purely administrative role'* as mentioned in C). The surrounding text would not incorporate a reference to *'a professional qualification'* once being required to progress to the top of HR, as described in B.

The answer to Question 11 is option A. There are both backward and forward links for this gap. The text before the gap refers to the poor opinion that some operational managers have of HR departments. Directly before the gap is the quote *'What do they actually contribute?'* This indicates that the gap will be an opinion about the significance of HR professionals. The information in A about the *'profession's growing importance'* is actually in contrast to the information before the gap and this is indicated by the linker at the beginning of A. In addition, the text after the gap begins with *'As Choi points out, salaries have never been higher'* and this links back to the *'rising levels of remuneration'* in option A.

Some candidates incorrectly chose C or E as their answer to Question 11. Although both have possible backward links they do not fit with the text that follows the gap. Since the text after the gap begins with *'As Choi points out'*, there must be a reference in the gap to salaries or pay. It is important that candidates check that the option they choose fits with the text before and after the gap.

### **Part 3**

This was one of the less challenging parts of the paper and was handled well by most candidates, despite a few having problems with questions 14 and 17.

With question 14, the correct answer is A but some candidates chose C. The question is targeting the second sentence of the second paragraph: *'The 1,100 staff had lost confidence in the company and did not know what was going to happen to them.'* In the context of a struggling company, this equates to a concern about job security. There is a possibility that some candidates confused *'lead'* with *'mislead'* and therefore chose C, but there is no suggestion in the text that managers deceived staff about the company's position. The text simply indicates that management was incompetent and uncommunicative.

Some candidates found Question 17 challenging. The correct answer is C, which is targeting, in the second sentence of the fifth paragraph, the need to *'negotiate extended credit'*. According to the text, this indicates that a business is in trouble. Quite a few candidates chose B as their answer. Although option B and the text have similar vocabulary (for example *'credit'* and *'suppliers'*) the overall meaning of B is not the same as the text. The text does not say that new credit terms were *'refused'*. It is important that candidates think about the overall meaning of an option and are not influenced by individual lexis. The correct option C is phrased differently to the text, but the overall meaning is the same.

#### Part 4

This was one of the more challenging parts of the paper and some candidates found Questions 23, 24 and 31 difficult.

The correct answer to 23 is A but quite a few candidates were attracted to C. The text describes a company's financial results and the extent to which it is achieving targets. The question tests the phrase 'on track' in terms of reaching a target. Option C does not fit grammatically and would only be possible if the surrounding text became, *'and is on the way to reaching its target'*.

Many candidates found Question 24 challenging. The correct answer is D but some weaker candidates seemed unsure of the answer and were attracted to options A and B. *'Slowing down'* collocates strongly with *'the economy'* and although *'falling down'* and *'breaking down'* are possible in other contexts they would not be used to describe problems in the economy.

Another question that some candidates found challenging was 31. The correct answer is B but quite a few candidates chose D. The text describes how a market is expected to change from one in which too many are competing to one in which three major companies would operate. The correct business term for this process is *'consolidation'*. The option *'combination'* can be used to describe a similar process but is not appropriate in a business context.

#### Part 5

This task, which focuses on grammatical accuracy, was one of the more challenging parts of the test. Candidates found questions 35, 39 and 41 particularly difficult.

Many candidates found Question 35 challenging. Line 35 is actually a correct line but candidates identified *'any'* as an extra word. It is important that candidates do not regard a word that is superfluous as grammatically incorrect. While it is possible to delete *'any'* from the sentence, the sentence does not become grammatically incorrect with it.

Another line some candidates found difficult was 39 where the extra word was *'up'*. Without this word, the line becomes *'to turn survival into growth'*. The phrasal verb *'to turn up'*, meaning to appear unexpectedly, is not appropriate in this context. Some candidates incorrectly identified *'of'* as the extra word. James Griffith is the president *of* the company; *'President Lebrun'* would only be possible if Lebrun was the person's name.

Line 41 also caused problems for some candidates. The extra word is *'additionally'* but some candidates incorrectly identified this as a correct line.

- **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 Two was the part of the paper candidates found most challenging and it may be a task type that candidates need additional practice in. 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.

Part Four was also a challenging part of the paper. In order to improve their performance on this part of the paper, it may be useful for candidates 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.

Part Five was another challenging task. 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.

Although candidates did not perform badly in Part 3, they may benefit from practice in 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 may say something similar, but not exactly the same as the text; or the options may occur in the text but only one is correct with a particular stem or question.

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

**Candidates should**

- pay attention to the complete meaning of the sentences in Part 1.
- read the whole text in Part 2 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.
- 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.
- regularly review their choices in Part 2. As they work through the task, a difficulty in finding a particular extract may indicate that they have already used it incorrectly for an earlier gap. Always leave enough time to double check answers against the text.
- pay attention to the general theme of the paragraphs in Part 3.
- read the text and questions very carefully in Part 3. Remember that the options A – D in the question may say something very similar, but not the same, in meaning as the text.
- 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.
- keep vocabulary lists and try to make use of words that are new. This will be particularly useful for Part 4.
- look carefully at the sentences in Part 5. Is the word chosen followed by a certain preposition or grammatical structure? Does it collocate with the surrounding words?
- remember that the extra word in Part 5 has to be grammatically wrong and not just superfluous.
- write the whole word in Part 5 in capital letters and not a mixture of lower and upper case.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- match words alone in Part 1. There are usually some similarities between sections and candidates need to make sure that their choice matches the complete meaning of the question.
- ignore the introductory adverbs or phrases which link with ideas that go before the gap in Part 2. For example, 'however' or 'but' must be preceded by a contrasting idea.
- forget the need for tenses in the Part 2 extracts to fit logically with those already present in the base text.
- choose more than one letter for any of the answers in Parts 1 – 4.
- 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><b>Correspondence:</b> e.g. explaining, apologising, reassuring, complaining</p> <p><b>Report:</b> describing, summarising</p> <p><b>Proposal:</b> 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 and 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**

This part of the paper focused on a company's decision to introduce identity cards. The task required candidates to write an email saying which staff needed identity cards, to explain why they were being introduced and inform staff how they could get one.

The majority of candidates answered the question well using a neutral or informal register appropriately. Only a small number of candidates misinterpreted the task and wrote about business cards or credit cards.

Most candidates addressed the points in the order presented on the paper, although a few dealt with the reason for introducing the identity cards first. Candidates are not penalised if they do not deal with the points in the order presented, as it is not a requirement.

A small number of candidates produced answers that were considerably over length. Candidates should remember that they are required to write concisely in Part 1 and where the delivery medium is a memo or an e-mail, they do not need to include to/from/date/subject details. Also, since twice as many marks are available for the Part 2 task as for the Part 1 task, it is important that candidates allocate their time appropriately and do not spend too much time on Part 1.

Generally point 1 was handled well, with strong candidates using appropriate business language such as *'any member of staff who joined our company last year'* or *'all members of the research and development department'*. Other candidates produced fairly minimal responses such as *'all staff'*, or *'every member of staff'*, and although this response is adequate, it needs to be borne in mind that points are awarded for demonstrating a range of structure and vocabulary. In the case of those candidates who responded to the point by saying *'certain staff'*, this was considered unsatisfactory as the target reader would not be clearly informed. Candidates must ensure they provide the information required and should not simply 'lift' language from the task rubric.

Most candidates dealt with point 2 very well and a range of language was produced such as: *'identity cards have been introduced to improve our security'*; *'they will allow us to work more effectively'* and *'the cards enable us to maximise security'*. The relatively small number of candidates who confused identity cards with business or credit cards gave inappropriate explanations and lost marks for this.

Point 3 was dealt with well by the majority of candidates, with strong candidates expanding on the point and giving responses such as: *'please give a recent photo to your line manager by Friday'* and *'you can get your card from the HR department anytime this week'*. Responses such as: *'you can get it from the office'* and *'all staff must go to room 10'* were adequate, but demonstrated a more limited range of language which could not be credited so highly.

## **Part 2**

In this part, candidates had to produce a short report for their line manager about the high turnover of staff at a particular retail store and explain the reasons for this. On the whole, there were some strong answers and only a small number of candidates misinterpreted the task.

Most candidates clearly understood who they were writing to and produced well-organised reports using a consistently formal or neutral register, which was appropriate. However, a small number of candidates opened or closed their reports with letter features, which should be avoided. Strong candidates dealt with the points coherently, combining them using a range of cohesive devices and making use of appropriate headings (e.g. Introduction/Findings/Conclusions/Recommendations), which provided the reports with a clear structure. As with Part 1, candidates are not expected to address the content points in a set order, but they should be dealt with in a coherent manner. Failure to clearly address each of the content points in turn will

result in marks being lost, so candidates should be encouraged to tick the points as they address them and to check that they have supplied the information required.

Point 1 required candidates to indicate that a small or low number of staff were leaving the Highgate store. On the whole, candidates dealt with the point well and acceptable responses included: *'only 2 staff left the Highgate store in 2005'*; *'very few staff left Highgate'*; *'the turnover at Highgate was relatively low'*. A small proportion of candidates compared turnover figures for the Highgate and Parkside stores, e.g. *'Highgate was lower than Parkside'*, without indicating the Highgate number was low. This could imply that both stores have a high turnover of staff, which would misinform the target reader, so this response was considered unacceptable.

For point 2 candidates had to explain what negative impact high staff turnover has had on the Parkside store. The point was addressed in a variety of ways and elicited a range of language. Examples of good responses included: *'this high turnover has reduced the store's profit considerably'* and *'this has led to a drop in sales of 16%'*.

However, the point was sometimes omitted and a significant number of candidates appeared to confuse cause and effect and gave reasons for staff leaving the store instead of explaining the effect of staff leaving, which resulted in marks being lost.

Point 3 required candidates to explain how staff training would benefit the company and was dealt with well by the majority of candidates. Strong candidates expanded on the point and gave responses such as: *'trained staff will greatly benefit the company as they will be more skilled'* and *'productivity will increase significantly as a result of staff training'*.

Point 4 was handled adequately by the majority of candidates. Although little expansion was required, stronger candidates elaborated on the point, e.g. *'because of our tight budget we could not offer more paid holiday at present'*. However, some candidates appeared not to have clearly understood the point and gave responses such as: *'more paid holidays are not possible therefore we must introduce more paid holidays'*.

For point 5 candidates had to explain why a bonus scheme would benefit the company and generally the point was dealt with satisfactorily although some candidates failed to provide a reason and therefore did not fully address the point. Examples of good responses included: *'it is a good way to encourage staff to work harder'* and *'if the company introduces a bonus scheme, morale will be increased'*.

- **Recommendations for candidate preparation**

### **Part 1**

The writing task in Part 1 tests whether candidates can write concisely and convey specific information to a named 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.

Sometimes in Part 1 candidates are tempted to copy the explanatory information provided as part of their answers. Although it is expected that they will use certain key words from the task, they should, wherever possible, consider how they can rephrase to show expansion and range of language.

However, there is a fine balance between expansion and range on the one hand and irrelevance on the other, and 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 also help them to produce a more authentic response.

The most frequent reason for penalising answers is omission and candidates need to check that they have covered each of the bulleted points adequately.

Candidates should also remember that they do not have to tackle the points one by one, but should think of the whole message, understand what the points mean, express them in their

own language succinctly and effectively and combine them skilfully with appropriate linking and reordering if necessary. They should also think about the register and tone of the answer depending on whom they are writing to and what is being said.

## Part 2

As in Part 1, candidates 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 set. The best practice is to read the whole question before writing anything, paying special attention to where the arrows from the handwritten notes are pointing. Candidates 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 candidates respond to the handwritten notes they should try to be inventive with the information that they need to supply, but not go into too much detail as they will be wasting time and effort. If there are tables and figures, they should not analyse every detail in writing, but use them as a basis for comment. With this task, the figures were the basis for a comparison of staff turnover between the two stores. Although the figures for 2004 were provided (to make it clear that the figure at Highgate had fallen, while the figure at Parkside had risen), it was not necessary for candidates to comment on this.

One important consideration is the creation of grammatically sound sentences from the notes, and information presented. Many candidates, for example, struggled with the verb recommend (*'It is recommended that the company introduces a bonus scheme because ...'*). Candidates should also take care with the spelling of words that occur frequently in business reports such as 'staff' and 'conclusion' (*'staffs', 'stuff', and 'conclution'* were common misspellings).

For any report, clear organisation is very important and useful work can be done in class on report layout and structure, with attention being paid to paragraphing and sub-headings. It is also clear that students need to consider ways of ensuring a neutral tone in their reports, and to ensure that they do not include letter features, such as 'Dear Sir' and 'Yours sincerely', as well as overly personal references.

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

**Candidates should**

- read the question thoroughly and underline the important parts.
- 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.
- make sure they include important information in a grammatically correct way.
- use a range of business words and expressions.
- write clearly so that the examiner can read their answer.
- keep to the word limit.
- keep to the correct task format and avoid mixing them, e.g. report with letter features.
- check each answer carefully at the end.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- add too much information to Part 1 answers.
- '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 and structures repetitively.
- over-analyse visually presented information.
- 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 monologues; 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 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 one option from a set of eight (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, with question 1 proving the most straightforward. Candidates found Question 3 the most challenging, with some weaker candidates choosing the distractor, *'fixed'*, rather than the key, *'current'*. In Question 2, some candidates wrote *'a long term'*, failing to make sure their answer fitted the gap in the prompt grammatically. (The correct key was *'long term'*.) Candidates should check that their answer both makes sense in the prompt and fits grammatically. It is also worth noting that inaccurate spelling was another common reason for error, especially in Question 4, where some candidates wrote *'loses'* instead of *'losses'*

Conversation Two: Candidates found this task more challenging than the other tasks in this part, with Question 6 causing particular difficulty. Weaker candidates failed to process the prompt adequately and so were misled by the distractor, writing *'costs'* instead of *'penalty clause'*, when in fact the word *'cost'* was included in the prompt, and so could not have been a key. Another problem for some candidates seems to have been that they misheard the key, and thus wrote *'skilled'* instead of *'unskilled'* for Question 7, and *'contact'* instead of *'contract'* for Question 8.

Conversation Three: Some candidates tackled this task reasonably well, although the spelling of *'engineer'* in question 9 proved demanding. In Question 11, some candidates misheard the key, *'hardware'* and wrote *'hardway'*, while others spelled the correct answer wrongly and wrote *'hardwear'*. Spelling was also a problem in Question 12, with some candidates writing *'objectifs'* rather than *'objectives'*.

### **Part 2**

Section One: In general, candidates successfully processed and interpreted what they heard in this part. Question 16 was the most straightforward, and Question 17 the most challenging. To correctly select D, the key in 17, candidates had to process the sentence *'It's easy to forget to allow time for applicants to find out things that are relevant to them'*, which meant *'ask questions'*. Weaker candidates chose A, presumably because they heard the words *'challenging questions'*, but the interviewer actually said it was better not to spend too much time on these and get *'bogged down'*. Other candidates chose G after hearing the word *'relevant'*, but this related to the interviewee asking about what was relevant, not to what the interviewer wanted to know.

Section Two: This section was done reasonably well, although some candidates found Questions 19 and 20 difficult, 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.

In Question 19, the key was D, and the answer was given in the words *'it was the breakdowns which really upset the staff'*. Weaker candidates hearing the word *'staff'* chose A. Others selected B, but although the speaker mentions *'initially'* believing costs were underestimated, this is clearly ruled out with the words *'we managed to avoid an overspend'*.

In Question 20, the key was G, given in the words *'Unfortunately, we hadn't anticipated the component manufacturer going out of business.'* But many candidates opted for B, presumably because of the phrase *'when the money runs out'*, but this was mentioned as an issue the management team was trained to deal with, not a problem encountered on the project.

### **Part 3**

Performance on this part was mostly good, although Questions 23, 27 and 28 proved challenging for a number of candidates. In Question 23, the correct answer is C. Candidates needed to process the stem (i.e. why the Chief Executive is in a difficult position) and listen for

a clue in the recording that matched this i.e. *'Healthway's new CEO is taking control of a company which....., but its core business is mature, and successive managements simply haven't come up with a winning formula to deliver dynamic sales growth.'* There is a reference to shareholders in what the speaker says, but they are current shareholders – there is no reference to *'failing to attract new shareholders'*, so B could not be the key. Similarly, Healthway is described as *'a well-loved and trusted retail brand'*, so there is no indication that it is becoming *'less popular with the general public'* and A is therefore not correct.

In Question 27, the answer is C, reflecting the criticism implicit in the words: *'But even at the outset, few investors were taken in by his over-optimistic forecasts, and the doubters were proved right.'* There are references both to *'a chain of stores'* and to *'health centres running alongside the existing stores'* as in options A and B, but neither is mentioned in a financial context or in the context of criticism, so these options are not the keys.

In Question 28, A is the correct answer, but a number of candidates selected B or C. The speaker says that *'there was a danger that .... mistakes would be made'*, so B and C are tempting, given the references to the company losing *'individuals, or even whole departments, that it needed'*. But then the speaker clearly states: *'He managed to avoid that, but he was quite unable to communicate the reasons behind the changes...'*, which both rules out B and C and confirms A as the key. Candidates should be advised to process the whole of what the speaker says, and not simply expect isolated words or phrases to provide the answer. They need to listen for context, attitude and opinion.

- **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 meaning and grammar. The use of pre-listening tasks in class 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 establish what is required. Answers to this part are rarely a simple matter of dictation, so candidates should be aware that the prompt in the recording is likely to correspond to the wording on the question paper, but not be identical to it.

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 as well as in terms of meaning and context. However, candidates should not spend too long struggling with one particular 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.

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

**Candidates should**

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

**Candidates shouldn't**

- worry if they are unsure of the answers the first time they hear each piece.
- try to write a more complicated word or phrase than the one heard in Part 1.
- spend too much time on a question that they are having difficulty with, they 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 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 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 tested on their ability to interact appropriately using appropriate functional language and strategies.

- **Assessment**

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

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

- **Comments on candidate performance**

Candidates' performance for May 2006 was very similar to that of the same session in 2005. Analysis of data reveals that candidates had no particular problems with any specific task and that the highest average mark was for Pronunciation, with lower average scores for Grammar and Vocabulary and Discourse Management.

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

### **Part 1**

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

### **Part 2**

In this part of the test, candidates 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, such candidates may wish to speak about the first choice, which is designed to be accessible to those with 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 earlier in Part 3. 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.

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

**Candidates should**

- familiarise themselves with the form, function and procedures for all parts of the test.
- take every opportunity to practise their English in groups and pairs, both inside and outside the classroom before the test, particularly in a business environment, if possible.
- take opportunities to show what they are capable of and 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.
- ask for repetition of instructions if they are unclear about what to do.
- show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking and respond appropriately to their partner's utterances.
- try to avoid long silences and frequent pauses.
- be prepared to initiate discussion in Part 3, as well as respond to what their partner has said.
- speak clearly and loudly enough for the examiners to hear.

**Candidates shouldn't**

- prepare long responses in advance, as it is unlikely that questions will be answered appropriately.
- try to give their views during their partner's long turn.
- try to dominate their partner or interrupt in an abrupt way.
- make frequent pauses and hesitations during the interaction or during their own turn.
- worry if they disagree with their partner. As long as they are polite and not overbearing, this is all part of interactive communication.
- 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 2006

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

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

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

Fax: +44 1223 460278

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