



UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE
ESOL Examinations

Experts in Language Assessment

Business English Certificates

BEC Vantage Examination Report

May 2007

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Business English Certificate Vantage

Examination Report

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WEBSITE REFERENCE

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

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INTRODUCTION

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

• **Grading**

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

The 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 4)
- 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 2007 examination was 38%. The pass rate in China was 35%, compared to 76% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 4% of candidates were awarded a grade 'B' (2% in the case of China, and 22% 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 13 weeks after the May examination session, including Examination Papers 1–3, tape/CD and tapescript for Paper 3, keys, sample Speaking test material and Paper 2 mark schemes and sample scripts)
- *BEC Speaking Test Video* (for information on the Speaking test including worksheets for candidates).

In addition, online teaching resources for BEC 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

The text for this part was an article advising managers on pricing policy. The majority of candidates performed well on the task, although Question 3 and Question 4 proved relatively challenging.

The correct answer to Question 3 is D. It is targeting the end of the section: *'The worst approach is to try to keep the pricing structure secret from customers. Nowadays, that is more likely to lead to lost contracts....'* Some weaker candidates incorrectly selected B as their answer. It is possible that they were attracted to the reference in B to the consumer goods company that went bankrupt. However, this was a consequence of prices being miscalculated. It was not a result of them being concealed.

The correct answer to Question 4 is B. It is targeting lines 5 and 6 of this section: *'...introduced software for every sales representative's laptop, enabling them to provide consistent and accurate price quotes'*. The text is clearly describing the means by which the company ensured precision in its pricing. Although a few weaker candidates selected C or, to a lesser extent, D, there is no reference in these sections to precision in pricing decisions.

Part 2

The text for this part was an article about management recruitment in the banking sector. Some weaker candidates had difficulties with Question 9 and Question 10, but on the whole candidates coped very well with the task.

In Question 9, most of the strong candidates chose the correct answer, A. Option A has strong backward and forward links. There is a backward link between *'Although others may put it lower ...'* in option A and the reference in the text to the *'10 [to] 15 per cent of the headhunting market'* that Edwards' company controls. There is a forward link between *'... the company's reputation is not based on market share alone'* in option A and the reference after the gap to *'Rather, it is the high-calibre jobs and people that define the company's success.'*

Some of the weaker candidates chose C, which is the distractor. Option C does not fit in gap 9 in terms of the development of the text. The fact that Pinnacle controls 10 to 15 per cent of the market for senior banking jobs could not indicate that the way the company searches for candidates favours a particular type of manager.

In Question 10 the correct answer is D. *'This acceptance'* in option D refers back to HR directors' recognising the role played by Pinnacle. The reference to them not being *'universally happy'* in option D is developed after the gap by a description of their concerns.

Some weaker candidates incorrectly chose B as their answer to Question 10. Option B describes a *'chief worry'* about headhunters. It would not be possible for option B to develop the point made before the gap about the *'valuable role'* played by headhunters such as Pinnacle.

Part 3

The text for this part was an article about company brochures. It was a relatively challenging task, with Question 17 and Question 18 proving the most difficult for candidates.

The correct answer to Question 17 is B, which targets lines 8 to 11 of the fifth paragraph: *'But remember that it is not enough just to state these; in order to persuade, they need to be spelt out. One possibility is to quote recommendations from existing customers.'* Quite a few candidates incorrectly gave A as the answer to this question. They may have failed to realise that although there are references to *'potential customers'* and *'existing customers'* the writer is not reminding companies to *'consider old customers as well as new ones'*.

Question 18 tests the phrase *'run of the mill'* and the correct answer is D. Careful reading of the text makes it possible for candidates to understand the meaning of the phrase. The context and in particular references to *'make you stand out'* and *'that all-important magical ingredient'* indicate that the phrase means *'ordinary'*. Some of the weaker candidates incorrectly chose A, *'eye-catching'*, as their answer. It is possible that they overlooked the reference to *'features that can distinguish your brochure from the run of the mill.'* It would not be plausible in this context to make a brochure distinct from *'eye-catching'*.

Part 4

The text for this part was an article describing the growth of online exchanges. Although it was the least challenging part of the paper, Question 28, Question 29 and Question 30 caused difficulties for some weaker candidates.

In Question 28 the correct answer is A. The *'confidence ofbuyers'* is one of the various aspects of business success described in the paragraph. As with *'consumer confidence'* it is a relatively strong collocation. Some weaker candidates chose option B, *'security'*, which is inappropriate semantically.

In Question 29 the correct answer is D, *'criteria'*, and is a reference to the success criteria that are described in the previous paragraph. There were some candidates who incorrectly wrote *'necessities'* as their answer, perhaps not realising that *'one business that met these necessities'* is not a strong collocation.

In Question 31 the correct answer is B, *'invite'*. Some weaker candidates chose D as their answer, perhaps overlooking the fact that answers may be determined by grammatical as well as semantic constraints.

Part 5

The text was an extract from a report describing a company's annual performance. It was the most challenging task on the paper, with Question 41 and Question 45 proving the most difficult.

In Question 41 *'the'* is an extra, grammatically incorrect word. The correct phrase is *'on sale'* and no article is required: *'a number of new products ... are already on sale in our key markets'*. Some candidates put *'key'* as the extra word. Although *'key'* is not necessary in the sentence, it does not make it grammatically incorrect.

In Question 45, there is no extra word and the line is grammatically correct. Some candidates gave *'already'* as their answer. The line is correct with or without *'already'* but it is important that candidates realise they are not identifying superfluous words. They need to select a word that makes the line incorrect. Other candidates identified *'this'* as an extra word in Question 44. However, *'this'* is required. It refers back to *'there is still much more to be done'* (in relation to *'the company's position as the recognised industry leader'*) and the final sentence would be grammatically incorrect without it. *'Extra'* is the extra word in this 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.

In order to prepare for Part 2 candidates should make sure they 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.

In order to improve performance in Part 3, candidates 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.

In order to improve their performance on Part 4, 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 5 has a grammatical focus and candidates may need to practise more tasks that focus on accuracy. Candidates should also remember that the extra word has to be wrong and not simply superfluous.

- **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>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 tasks 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 the tasks in the question paper 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 of the register for the intended audience, and on the accuracy and conciseness of language used. 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 was an email informing staff about a departmental transfer.

On the whole, candidates were well prepared and answered the question well, using a neutral or semi-formal register. Relatively few candidates failed to deal with the three content points appropriately. Most candidates addressed the points in the order given, although a few explained what the new responsibilities would be (the third point) before giving the date of the transfer. This was acceptable as candidates are not required to deal with the points in the order in which they are presented.

There were a limited number of candidates who misinterpreted the task and wrote an email informing staff that the complete department would be moving. Candidates who did this were marked down on task. The question clearly refers to the transfer of an individual and candidates were required to establish this in their responses.

A minority of candidates produced answers that were over-length. Candidates should remember that they are required to write concisely in Part 1. Where the delivery medium is an email, candidates 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.

Point 1

This point, required candidates in the capacity of a company employee to tell staff which department they would be moving to. It was dealt with well by most candidates and stronger answers included a range of future forms.

Examples of good responses included:

'I am going to be transferred to the Sales Department.'

'I would like to inform you that I will be transferred to the Marketing Department next week.'

'I have been appointed to the Sales Department due to my excellent interpersonal skills.'

'I'm pleased to tell you that I am going to another department.'

There were some candidates who made little attempt to process the language, resorted to lifting from the question paper (e.g. *'I am moving to the Marketing Department.'*) and therefore did not take the opportunity to demonstrate their language skills. However, there were very few candidates who could not give an adequate response for this point and few task penalties were awarded.

Point 2

For this point, candidates had to indicate when they would be moving department. It was a relatively straightforward point and the majority of candidates dealt with it well, although some failed to give a day, date or appropriate time reference when the transfer would take place.

Examples of candidates' responses included:

'I will take on the position on 5th June.'

'I am moving on Tuesday morning.'

'I begin my new job on Monday next week.'

There were some candidates who linked Points 1 and 2. An example of this was:

'I'm going to work in the Marketing department from 1st June.'

Combining points in this manner is acceptable and can be a means of achieving conciseness, at the same time bearing in mind the need to produce an adequate sample of language for assessment. The challenge to candidates when linking points is to do it effectively making use of appropriate cohesive devices.

Point 3

For this point candidates were required to explain what their new responsibilities would be. The point generated a good variety of language and allowed the stronger candidates to demonstrate more sophisticated language use. Examples of candidate responses included:

'My responsibilities include assisting the Sales Manager.'

'I will mainly work on organising advertisements and Trade fairs.'

'I'm in charge of communicating with foreign clients.'

'I will be responsible for the upgrading of our existing products and development of new products.'

Part 2

In this part, candidates had to produce a short report for their line manager about the performance of three stores in their region and to recommend the closure of one of them. On the whole, there were some good answers to the question with relatively few candidates misinterpreting the task.

In Part 2, candidates can decide on the order in which they address the content points, and are not obliged to work down the list in lockstep fashion. For example, with this task, the most common order of points that candidates followed was 3, 4, 5, 1, 2. The crucial thing is for candidates to address all the content points and not omit any, and they are therefore advised to tick off the points as they address them and check that they have provided the information required.

Most candidates were clear about who they were writing to and the reports were written in a formal or neutral register, which was appropriate. The majority of candidates were familiar with the format of reports and organised content using headings, which helped give a clear structure and layout. A comparatively small number of candidates opened or closed their reports with letter features, which should be avoided.

Point 1

For this content point, candidates were required to suggest the closure of the village store. The point was dealt with well by the majority of candidates and there were relatively few omissions.

Stronger candidates rephrased the language provided in the task. Examples included:

'Of all the stores in my region, village store is performing badly and should be closed.'

'It is recommended that we close the village store.'

Some weaker candidates did not attempt to rephrase or expand upon the prompts, e.g. *'I suggest closing the village store'*. In order to be credited for language use, candidates need to produce more than a minimal response and avoid simply lifting words or expressions directly from the question paper.

Point 2

For this point, candidates were required to suggest a new service for the stores that would remain open. On the whole, the point was answered well and strong candidates were able to expand and show range. Examples of their responses included:

'We shall provide free parking for customers, as an increasing number of people there have cars nowadays.'

'As to service improvements, we can diversify the kinds of products such as providing hi-tech and electronic products.'

There were a number of task penalties for this content point, mainly because candidates simply did not attempt to address it. In other cases, there were candidates who inadequately dealt with the point, as they referred to 'a new service' or the need to 'improve service' and did not include information about the type of service or the form it would take.

Point 3

For this point, candidates needed to explain why the profits of the village store were low. This was possibly the most challenging point and provided the opportunity for stronger candidates to produce answers which demonstrated their language skills. At the same time, candidates' responses clearly showed that the point was accessible to weaker candidates. Examples of responses included

'It has a low profit of £20, 000 due to the undeveloped transport system.'

'The main reason for the low profit is the purchase power of the village people is too weak.'

'Most of them had moved to the town not far away.'

Point 4

This point required candidates to say that the £130,000 profits of the town-centre store were better than expected. It was a relatively straightforward point and was dealt with successfully by the majority of candidates.

Strong candidates reworked the language provided in the task and were given credit for doing so. Examples of this included:

'To my surprise, town-centre stores also achieved considerable success.'

... profits reached £130,000 which is a surprise.'

Other candidates expanded on the point and created a point of comparison by referring to a predicted profit figure. For example:

'... the profit level of £130,000 was better than the £90,000 we had predicted'

A small number of candidates dealt with the point without reference to £130,000. The content point did not require candidates to refer to the figure and such responses were not penalised. An example of such a response was:

'The town-centre store was located in a less convenient place, but nevertheless performed better than we had expected.'

A small number of candidates failed to address the point successfully because they only mentioned the improvement and not the fact that it was unexpected. An example of this included:

'The town-centre store gained £130,000 and showed a profit improvement.'

Point 5

This point required candidates to explain why the out-of-town store was popular with customers. The majority of candidates handled the point well and few had difficulty describing an appropriate explanation for its popularity. Examples of responses from stronger candidates included:

'The out-of-town store is very popular because the location of the store is very convenient for our customers.'

'Because of the scale and quality of the store, it has earned a lot of customers and a good reputation.'

'Owing to its stylish decoration and comfortable environment, it is very popular with the customers.'

'The out-of-town store is profitable because all the rich people are moving out of town.'

- **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 identify 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 evidence of their language skills, including a range of structures and lexis.

However, there is a fine balance between demonstrating range on the one hand and introducing 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 combine them effectively using appropriate linking devices and reordering information 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 excessive detail as this will be wasting time and effort. If there are tables and figures, candidates should not analyse every detail in writing, but use them as a basis for comment. With this task, the figures indicated how well each store was performing. The profit figure for the out-of-town superstore was provided to show that the store was performing well, but it was not necessary for candidates to detail the extent of the store's profits.

One important consideration is the creation of grammatically sound sentences from the notes, and information presented. Many candidates, for example, struggled with the verbs *suggest* and *recommend* (e.g. '*I suggest to supply free water to attract customers.....*' '*I recommend to close the village store.....*'). Candidates should also take care with the use of articles. The omission of articles was a common error (e.g. '*I think out-of-town superstore is popular because.....*').

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 addressed 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: In general, candidates found the first Part 1 task very accessible, with Question 2 causing least difficulty. Some candidates wrongly wrote 'recruitment report' as the answer to Question 1, and this was a plausible answer. However, the key was clearly stated with the words 'I called it jobsplan, all one word' and candidates had to recognise that 'it' was a reference back to the report. Most candidates correctly identified the key to Question 3 as 'appendix', but many had difficulty spelling this word. Stronger candidates correctly identified the key to Question 4 as 'head office', but weaker candidates failed to process the whole of what was said by the two speakers and thus wrongly gave 'hotel' as the key.

Conversation Two: Candidates again performed well on this task. The stronger candidates had little difficulty with Question 5, and correctly selected the key, 'discount store'. Some weaker candidates chose 'new warehouse' as the key, which was a plausible answer, but clearly ruled out by the fact that its location had already been decided. Most candidates chose the correct answers for Questions 6 and 7 although they experienced some difficulty with the spelling of the words 'deliveries' and 'surveys'. Question 8 proved slightly more challenging, with some candidates clearly understanding the expression 'tax benefits', but perhaps being uncertain of how to spell it, and thus writing a close synonym such as 'tax relief'. This was accepted, as the meaning was correct, and the collocation was appropriate.

Conversation Three: Interestingly, candidates found the first two questions of this task the hardest in Part 1, and Question 11 the most straightforward, possibly because the relatively youthful candidature was very familiar with the term 'sound system'. In Question 9, weaker candidates wrongly selected 'sales training' as the key, possibly because it was the first plausible answer they heard, although it was clearly ruled out and the correct key was 'shareholders'. The same problem occurred in Question 10, with weaker candidates opting for plausible answers such as 'hall' and 'room', although if they had listened carefully to the whole of what the speaker said, they would have realised that these were not available on the date required and the key was 'VIP lounge'. Finally, Question 12 posed few difficulties for most candidates.

Part 2

Section One: In general, candidate performance on this section was again very satisfactory, with the majority of candidates answering questions 14, 16 and 17 correctly. Question 13 proved more challenging. Strong candidates correctly identified D as the key, with the words 'There has to be a framework in place of where and who to go to if they get stuck and need help' clearly giving the answer. Weaker candidates wrongly selected B or E as the key, probably because there were references to delegation and acting independently in what the speaker said. However, these were not made in the context of giving advice and were therefore not keys.

Similarly in question 15, the key was F, given by the words 'It's a mistake if you don't make it clear to staff what they're doing well and what they could improve on' and reinforced by the words 'some constructive suggestions are usually helpful'. Weaker candidates chose G, presumably because they misunderstood the intent and time reference in the words 'that's too important to leave till the job's finished'. Others wrongly selected E, probably misinterpreting the phrase 'Some managers think it's a form of interfering and doesn't give people space to get on with the job' as advice to give people freedom to act for themselves.

Section Two: Overall performance on this task was also good, with most candidates answering Questions 18, 19, 20 and 22 correctly.

However, some candidates found Question 21 more demanding. The key was C, given in the words 'it was the fact that we found a management group who we brought in to recommend

ways of improving our marketing that really helped'. Some weaker candidates wrongly selected B, perhaps thinking that a management group meant a production company. Others chose G, presumably because the speaker says 'good market research is absolutely vital'. However, this was not given as a reason for the success of an advertising campaign, and candidates should remember to read the rubric very carefully to avoid making this kind of mistake.

Part 3

It was pleasing to see that candidates are obviously extremely familiar with this type of multiple choice task, and thus performed competently. Most answered questions 23 – 27 and Question 30 correctly.

However, Questions 28 and 29 proved more challenging. In Question 28, the key was C, given by the words 'given they know they're a crucial supplier there's a danger in a few years they might want to buy us out'. Option A is clearly wrong because Brett Porter says 'The alternative for them would involve spending money on producing a rival product, which I know they would be reluctant to do'. Similarly B is incorrect because Brett Porter states that '... the people at Herne Publishing realise it's better for them to let me use my knowledge and contacts to establish the business.'

In Question 29, the key was A, given by the words 'In the last couple of years, the company turned over in excess of 700,000 pounds'. Option B is wrong because Brett Porter says 'our maps retail at ten to twenty-four pounds each' not that the average price is £24. Similarly, C is incorrect because Porter's company 'sold 200,000 maps in the first year alone'.

- **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 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 in May 2007 was consistent with that of May 2006. Feedback from oral examiners has been generally positive. Candidates who have not met each other before the Speaking test do not need to feel concerned as evidence suggests that this does not affect performance. In order to provide evidence of their language ability, it is important that candidates should take advantage of the opportunities provided to speak and interact with their partner.

Part 1

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

Part 2

In this part of the test, candidates 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 2007

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

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

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

Fax: +44 1223 460278

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

2. Have you prepared candidates for BEC 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.