



UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE
ESOL Examinations

Experts in Language Assessment

Business English Certificate

VANTAGE Examination Report

May 2008

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Business English Certificate Vantage

Examination Report

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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Paper 1 - Reading	3
Paper 2 - Writing	8
Paper 3 - Listening	15
Paper 4 - Speaking	20
Feedback Form	24

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 2008 session, and offers guidance on the preparation of candidates.

• Grading

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

The 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 2008 examination was 40%. The pass rate in China was 38%, compared to 77% for candidates from all other countries. In total, 5% of candidates were awarded a grade 'B' (4% in the case of China, and 23% for the rest of the world), and 1% a grade 'A' (less than 1% in the case of China, and 10% for the rest of the world).

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

• Special Consideration

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

• Irregular Conduct

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

• Notification of Results

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

- **Useful Documentation**

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

- *Regulations* (produced annually, for information on dates, etc.)
- *BEC Handbook* (for detailed information on the examination and sample materials)
- *Examination Report* (produced once a year)
- *Past Paper Pack* (available approximately 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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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 (including additional unnecessary words 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

Candidates performed very well on this matching task and it presented few difficulties for the majority of candidates. Candidates coped particularly well with Question 7, correctly matching it with the reference in section A to *'the industry's generally poor financial results.'*

Question 6 proved more challenging, with weaker candidates incorrectly matching it with section A or B. The correct answer to Question 6 is D. It targets the first sentence of D, *'We continually aim to enhance professionalism across the solutions offered by the firm.'* It is possible that the candidates who incorrectly chose section A were attracted to the last sentence here, *'our people continued to listen to their clients and deliver appropriate consulting solutions.'* However, although A describes the quality of service provision, it does not specifically refer to the *'improvement'* of that service.

The weaker candidates who chose B as their answer to Question 6 may have been drawn to the reference, *'We hope that our new international campaign, which explains to clients the wide range of services we offer, will help change that perception.'* However, this is not the same as, *'ongoing efforts to improve'*. Some candidates may also have been attracted to the specific reference in B to, *'the wide range of services we offer'* but it is important that candidates do not match only at word level.

In addition, some weaker candidates had problems with Question 5, choosing C rather than the correct answer B. Question 5 targets a large part of B but particularly focuses on the last sentence, *'We have enormous growth potential, especially in emerging markets such as Asia and Latin America.'* Although Section C describes the current global strengths of the company, it does not refer to its expansion capabilities.

Part 2

This was the most challenging part of the paper with Questions 10 and 11 proving difficult for some candidates.

The correct answer to Question 10 is A. Extract A develops the point made in the text prior to the gap that the expectations fostered by an ethical style of leadership are *'uncompromisingly high'*, and describes how this can lead to entrepreneurs becoming disappointed. There were, however, some weaker candidates who chose B as their answer to Question 10. Extract B is a distractor and does not fit in Question 10 because *'They'* in B does not have a grammatical referent in the text.

The correct answer to Question 11 is D. The text before the gap compares the people management qualities of entrepreneurs with those of chief executives. Extract D develops this point and describes how entrepreneurs are *'less likely to promote team work and co-operation than chief executives'*. Some weaker candidates chose F as their answer to Question 11. Extract F, which is the correct answer to Question 8, does not develop this comparison between entrepreneurs and chief executives but focuses instead on the timing of certain decisions or actions.

Part 3

This was a relatively challenging task for candidates. In particular candidates had problems with Question 13 and Question 15.

The correct answer to Question 13 is B. It targets the last sentence of the first paragraph, which describes how store managers have been told to *'concentrate on giving more space to a limited number of bestsellers, advertised nationally by the company, and not to titles which sit on the shelves for weeks'*. With fewer titles being available in the stores, the range of books on sale is therefore reduced. Some candidates were attracted to option A instead of the correct answer B. Although the text mentions the decision of some managers to leave the company, this cannot be equated with *'a number of recent staff redundancies'*. Other candidates gave D

as their answer. But while option D refers to P&K's '*approach towards advertising different titles*', the text does not draw any distinction between different advertising policies. Neither does it say that company policy towards the advertising of book titles has been unpopular with managers.

The correct answer to Question 15 is B, but some weaker candidates chose option C or, to a lesser extent, D. The text attributes the success of MusicWorld to the fact that the '*top quality people*' who ran the stores continued to work for the company. The text describes this as '*the decisive factor*', thereby indicating that option B is the correct answer. The candidates who chose option C or D may have been attracted to the references to advertising and innovations. However, although Seymour mentions his decision to '*change the advertising agency*' and '*make some minor innovations in the stores*', these are presented as relatively unimportant factors. It is important that candidates are not unduly attracted to options that contain individual words that appear in the text. They need to consider the complete meaning of the option and the question or stem.

Part 4

The majority of candidates performed very well on this task, although Questions 29, 32 and 33 proved relatively challenging.

Question 29 tests phrasal verbs and the correct answer is option B. The text describes the company's practice of '*looking into*', in other words '*investigating*', the reasons for customers returning goods and presents this as a possible way of reducing the total number of returns. Some candidates were attracted to option A, perhaps not realising that '*carrying out*' describes an action being performed and would not be applied to discovering a reason.

Question 32 was also challenging for some candidates. The correct answer is B, a greater '*sense*' of security. Some weaker candidates gave C as their answer. However, '*belief*' would normally be followed by the preposition 'in' and is therefore ruled out grammatically. It is important that candidates think about the meaning of the four lexical options and also consider the text that surrounds a gap.

Part 5

Candidates had relatively few problems with this task and many were able to correctly identify the extra words in Questions 34, 39 and 44.

Quite a few candidates found Question 37 more difficult than the others. Although Question 37 is a correct line, some candidates identified '*to*' as an extra word. Candidates may have overlooked the need for '*to*' in the phrase '*exploit to a fraction of their true potential*' possibly confusing it with '*exploit potential*'. It is important that candidates remember that an unspecified number of lines in this part are correct and do not contain an extra word.

Another part of the task which was relatively challenging for candidates was Question 36. The grammatically incorrect word in this line is '*until*' but some weaker candidates identified '*either*' as the extra word. It is important that candidates distinguish between words that are incorrect and words that are superfluous. Although '*either*' is superfluous and could be removed, it is not, unlike '*until*', grammatically incorrect.

• 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.

The majority of candidates coped well with Part 1. For additional practice in this task type, candidates could quickly scan texts for the information required. It may help if key words in the question are underlined so that candidates remember what to look for.

Part 2 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.

Part 3 was relatively challenging for some candidates. This task requires careful reading and processing of text beyond word level. It is important that candidates avoid just matching words in the text with words in the questions and 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.

Candidates coped reasonably well with Part 4 but 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.

The majority of candidates had relatively few problems with Part 5. However, in order to improve their performance, 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.

• 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. They should 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 of the options A – D in the question, the three incorrect ones 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 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 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 required an email informing members of a marketing team of a change of meeting date. On the whole, candidates answered the question well. The task scenario was straightforward and there were relatively few misinterpretations. Most candidates addressed the three points in the order given although some addressed points one and two in reverse order; giving the reason for the date change before stating the new date. This was acceptable as candidates are not required to deal with the points in a particular order.

A minority of candidates wrote over-length answers. 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 to inform members of the marketing team of a new date for a marketing meeting. Most candidates referred to a specific day and appropriate responses included:

The meeting will be held on Monday instead.

It will change to next Tuesday....

A minority of candidates did not read the task carefully and changed the date of the meeting to 'next Friday', which was the day it had originally been scheduled for. This type of response would confuse the target reader and therefore led to marks being lost.

Although relatively few candidates misinterpreted this point, some were penalised for poor language control. In some cases, language expression was awkward and in others there was little evidence of tense control. Changing the date of a meeting is a basic function in business English and some candidates would benefit from better preparation in this area. Examples of responses that were penalised for poor language included:

... will be postponed on Monday due to ...

... has been advanced on next Tuesday

... it was held for next Sunday

Point 2

This point required candidates to explain why the date of the marketing meeting had been changed. It gave candidates an opportunity to demonstrate some range of vocabulary and structures and many dealt with it satisfactorily.

A range of explanations for the date change were provided. A large number of candidates explained that visitors were due at the company. Appropriate responses included:

... a group of important clients will come to our company

... there will be an important foreign delegation

... the Chairman wants to come to the meeting

Other candidates said that they (the sender of the message) would be absent on that day or would have other responsibilities to deal with. Appropriate responses included:

I won't be back from an important trade fair...

... I will be abroad.

I have a training course on that day...

we received a new task (that) needed to be prepared as soon as possible....

Although the majority of candidates answered this point well, there were a few common errors. Some candidates referred to the 'market meeting' despite 'marketing meeting' being in the question. Candidates need to read the question carefully and check the spelling of key words they choose to use in their answers. Other candidates showed poor control of linking words. For example, a number of candidates began sentences with 'because' or 'and' e.g.

The meeting will be changed to next Tuesday. Because a group of important clients will come to our company.

Appropriate linking of the elements in a task is an important aspect of concise writing and some candidates would benefit from further practice in this area.

Point 3

This point required candidates to suggest an additional point for the agenda. Any reference to an item for discussion at the meeting was accepted for this point. Appropriate responses included:

do remember to bring the quarter sales figure for discussion

please bring the sales report (so we can decide)... the sales strategy for next year

There was a relatively high number of candidates who did not clearly address this point and some candidates described general preparations for the meeting, which was regarded as inappropriate in terms of the task. It is important that candidates read the task carefully and provide the information that is required. Examples of inappropriate responses to the task included:

...please attend the meeting on time

turn off your mobile phone ...

please take your notebook...

...confirm that the meeting will still be held in room 3

Part 2

This part of the paper required candidates to write a letter to a group of investors requesting funding. The topic was clearly understood by the majority of candidates and they were able to produce answers in letter format with an appropriately formal or neutral tone. On the whole, the content points were covered satisfactorily. However, some weaker candidates did not deal with the first point very well and point 5 was often omitted.

In terms of language, some weaker candidates lacked control of basic structures and frequently omitted definite and indefinite articles and demonstrated poor control of prepositions. There was widespread incorrect use of 'recently', which was used to mean 'soon', and of the phrase

'*according to*', which was used in the same way as 'because'. This points to the need for candidates to have further practice in the use of connectives and linking expressions.

Point 1

This point required candidates to briefly describe their company and the stronger candidates dealt with it well. Appropriate responses included:

our company was established 10 years ago and now has a 60% market share in the field of software development ...

we are an IT business with a good reputation ...

However, some candidates either missed this point out or dealt with it in very imprecise terms. Candidates should be mindful that in order to demonstrate their language ability, some expansion of the content points is required. Examples of uninformative answers included:

we are (an) old company ...

we are experienced ...

Point 2

This point required candidates to provide details of a new product. It was dealt with very well and produced a wide range of products including a '*computer game*', '*new word processing software*', '*men's sportswear*', and '*a new kind of mineral water*'. Some candidates described the product in terms of what it could do and appropriate responses included:

... a new car (to) force (the) driver to stop before an accident

to help housewives clean their floors more easily

Point 3

Candidates were required to describe the market for the new product. On the whole, it was handled well with expressions of confidence in the market and reference to potential customers. Appropriate responses included:

we surveyed 1000 people and they are interested in it ...

our new product will prove to be popular among teachers and students ...

we have (a) strong existing customer base ...

we already have 50% market share...

Point 4

Candidates were required to state the amount of finance they required. Figures higher or lower than the amount stated in the advertisement were accepted as it was considered realistic for the actual amount of investment required to be stated. Strong candidates were able to phrase the request in an appropriate way:

we need 10 million euros to expand our sales areas

I estimate we need up to 4 million euros ...

we need 5 million euros to launch our new product and enhance its brand image

However, some candidates phrased their request in a way that was inappropriate for a business letter. For example:

... I want 4 million euros

There was also widespread misuse of the word 'available', which was provided in the advertisement. For example:

... we need 6 million available to investment

... I think it is available for investment of 4 million euros

Candidates should, where possible, paraphrase the language that is provided in the task. When they choose to use language from the task, they must ensure it is used appropriately.

Point 5

This point required candidates to state that profits last year had increased. The important point for the target reader was that the company's profits had improved and different interpretations of when this had occurred were accepted. Although most candidates were able to refer to the company's profit levels, some had problems with the correct use of language. Examples of inappropriate language use included:

our profits were up for 9% last year ...

our profit increased nearly 2 million than ever before ...

References to figures and percentages are a common element of business correspondence and many candidates would benefit from more training in this area.

- **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 concisely. Students can be aided in this by learning and using precise business-related vocabulary, which will also help them to produce more authentic responses.

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 waste time and effort. An important consideration is the creation of grammatically sound sentences from the information presented. In particular, candidates need to take care with the use of articles, prepositions and verb tenses.

For letters, clear organisation is very important and useful work can be done in class on letter layout and structure, with attention being paid to opening formulae and paragraphing. It is also clear that students need to consider ways of ensuring an appropriately neutral or formal tone in their letters and to avoid use of overly personal references.

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

Candidates should

- read the questions 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 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 test areas such as topics or 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: As intended, candidates found the first Part 1 task very accessible, with Questions 2 and 4 causing least difficulty. Some candidates wrongly wrote *'rescheduled'* as the answer to Question 1, and this was a plausible answer. However, the key was clearly stated with the words *'That meeting will have to be cancelled'* and candidates had to recognise that *'That meeting'* was a reference back to the meeting with John Row of APF. Candidates should be advised to listen carefully for when the item is introduced, and not simply write down the first thing they hear. Question 3 proved the most challenging, with some candidates mis-hearing the key, *'lunch venue'* and incorrectly writing *'lunch menu'* instead.

Conversation Two: Candidates found this the most challenging of the Part 1 tasks, with Questions 7 and 8 proving more difficult than Questions 5 and 6. In Question 5, most candidates correctly identified the key as *'statistics'*, but a number of weaker candidates had problems with spelling and wrote *'stastistics'*. In Question 6, there was evidence that candidates had failed to process the information adequately, and so wrote *'design animation'*, rather than *'design'*, which was the correct answer. In Question 7, weaker candidates wrote *'graph'* as the answer, and this was plausible. But the correct key was *'bar chart'* with the answer given in the words *'The graph is fine, but I can't make sense of the bar chart'*. For the final question in this section, Question 8, a number of candidates again opted for an answer that was plausible, but not correct, and selected *'grammar mistake'*, rather than the correct answer, *'spelling error/mistake'*. Choosing the right answer required processing the whole of the sentence *'And finally, I remember we discussed the grammar mistake you had in slide 6, and you've dealt with that, but if you have another look, I'm sure you'll notice the spelling error that's crept in.'*

Conversation Three: Most candidates performed well on this part, but there were a few difficulties. In Question 9, some candidates failed to identify the correct answer, perhaps because they misheard it, and thus wrote *'medium studies'* rather than the correct answer, *'media studies'*, even though *'media'* is a high frequency word which they should be familiar with. A number of candidates also failed to process all the information in Question 10, which led to them writing *'part of project team'* instead of the correct answer, which was simply *'project team'*. Candidates should be reminded that the answer they write must fit grammatically with the gap in the notes and also make sense in context. Weaker candidates experienced difficulty with the spelling of the answer to Question 11, writing *'referances'*, instead of the correct answer, *'references'*.

Finally, some candidates wrongly identified *'marketing manager'* as the key to Question 12. The key was given in the words *'Can you forward them to section heads? They'll probably sort them a bit more before they go to the marketing manager'*, so *'marketing manager'* was clearly ruled out as a key, although it was plausible as an answer.

Part 2

Section One: In general, performance on this section was again very satisfactory, with the majority of candidates answering most questions correctly. Nonetheless, some candidates found Question 13 a little more demanding than the other questions in this task. The correct answer was F, with the speaker advising that it was important to praise the individual's strengths with the words *'Nothing is a better motivator than telling someone that they are doing a wonderful job'*, an idea which was strongly reinforced by the next sentence *'I do not believe it could ever be the wrong time or place to draw attention to someone's plus points.'* However, many weaker candidates selected A as the key, presumably misled by the final sentence *'So use your regular feedback sessions in this way to encourage your staff and make them feel good about themselves and their value to your company.'* The advice contained within this sentence was still the same, that is that you should praise a person's strengths; it was clear from the words *'use your regular feedback sessions'* that the regular feedback sessions were already in existence, and the speaker was not in fact advising their use, so A was not the key.

Section Two: Performance on this task was also good, with most candidates answering Questions 18, 21 and 22 correctly. However, a number of candidates found this second section more challenging than section one, with many finding Questions 19 and 20 particularly hard.

In Question 19, the key was F. The speaker used several reference words to explain the reason for joining the company, and candidates needed to understand these references correctly in order to reach the correct answer. The words were: *'we did a tour of the factory with several senior managers and saw all the different work areas. They (i.e. the managers) seemed really go-ahead and talked a lot about their plans for the future etc. That (i.e. everything about the managers and their approach) decided it for me.'*

Some weaker candidates selected B as the key, catching the word *'interview'* in what the speaker said, but failing to realise that the reference was negative: *'the human resources manager was rather unwelcoming'*. Others selected D. A *'wide variety of work'* was mentioned, but this was not given as the *reason* why the speaker joined the company. Candidates should remember to read the rubric very carefully to avoid making this kind of mistake.

In Question 20, the key was H, and this was given with the words *'I couldn't see myself being sufficiently challenged in the long run at my last place, whereas it was obvious in this current job description that if I stuck at the work I could move up the company.'* Some weaker candidates selected A, and the speaker did refer to commuting only a short distance, but this was with reference to the previous place of employment. Similarly, those candidates who chose C as the key also failed to recognise that the reference to work not being very challenging was related to the previous job, and was not given as a reason for the speaker joining the current company.

Part 3

It was pleasing to see that candidates were obviously extremely familiar with this type of multiple choice task, and thus performed competently. Most answered Questions 23 – 28 correctly, but experienced a little more difficulty with Questions 29 and 30.

In Question 29, the key was A, given in the words *'That centre now gets the right products to the right place at the right time, virtually 100% of the time. That's better than we've managed to achieve elsewhere....'* Candidates should be aware that they may have to process a whole section of what they hear in order to select a key. It was obvious that candidates who chose B or C as the key were uncertain of the answer and had simply selected a phrase they had heard that sounded similar to one of these options, although neither could have been the key.

A similar pattern emerged in Question 30. In order to get the key, B, candidates had to process *'With Performance Management, the desired behaviour becomes routine, so it gives a long-term payoff.'* Some candidates clearly heard the word *'objectives'*, or *'costs'* in what the speaker said subsequently, and so wrongly chose option A or C. If they had considered the context of these words and processed them carefully, they would have realised that neither of these options could be the key.

- **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 about to hear, 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, as 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 2008 was consistent with that of May 2007. Feedback from oral examiners has been generally positive. Candidates who have not met each other before the Speaking test do not need to feel concerned as evidence suggests that this does not affect performance. In order to provide evidence of their language ability, it is important that candidates 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 2008

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

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

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

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

2. Have you prepared candidates for BEC 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.