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PREFACE

This handbook is intended principally for teachers and course designers who are, or intend to become, involved in preparing candidates for the Cambridge Business English Certificates (BEC). There are separate handbooks for other Cambridge ESOL examinations.

The introductory part of the handbook provides a general background to the Cambridge ESOL examinations and an overview of the work of Cambridge ESOL, including a description of current procedures for test production. It is hoped that this will be of interest both to those who are familiar with the Cambridge ESOL examinations, and to those who are coming to them for the first time.

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INTRODUCTION TO CAMBRIDGE ESOL

University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL) is a part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), which has provided examinations in English for speakers of other languages since 1913. Cambridge ESOL offers an extensive range of examinations, certificates and diplomas for learners and teachers of English. In 2003 over 1.2 million people took these examinations at centres in over 130 countries.

Cambridge ESOL was formerly known as UCLES EFL. The title ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages – was adopted in October 2002, reflecting the increasing diversity of the candidature.

Cambridge ESOL examinations can be taken by anyone whose first language is not English. They are suitable for learners of all nationalities, whatever their first language and cultural background, and there are examinations suitable for learners of almost any age. The range of Cambridge ESOL examinations includes specialist examinations in Business English and English for Academic Purposes, as well as tests for young learners and a suite of certificates and diplomas for language teachers.

The examinations cover all four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. They include a range of tasks which assess candidates' ability to use English, so that in preparing for the examinations, candidates develop the skills they need to make practical use of the language in a variety of contexts. Above all, what the Cambridge ESOL examinations assess is the ability to communicate effectively in English.

Cambridge ESOL is committed to providing examinations of the highest possible quality. This commitment is underpinned by an extensive programme of research and evaluation, and by continuous monitoring of the marking and grading of all Cambridge ESOL examinations. Of particular importance is the rigorous set of procedures which are used in the production and pretesting of question papers, and these are described in the following section.

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)

Cambridge ESOL is a member of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), which was formed in 1990. The members are all providers of language examinations and certificates from countries within Europe.

The principal objectives of ALTE are as follows:

- to promote the transnational recognition of certification, especially in Europe
- to establish common standards for all stages of the language testing process, i.e. test development, question and materials writing, test administration, marking and grading, reporting of test results, test analysis and reporting of findings
- to collaborate on joint projects and in the exchange of ideas and know-how.

Cambridge ESOL examinations fulfil the Code of Practice established by ALTE. This Code of Practice focuses on the responsibilities of both examination providers and examination users and covers four main areas:

- developing examinations
- interpreting examination results
- striving for fairness
- informing examination takers.

For more information on ALTE please visit www.ALTE.org

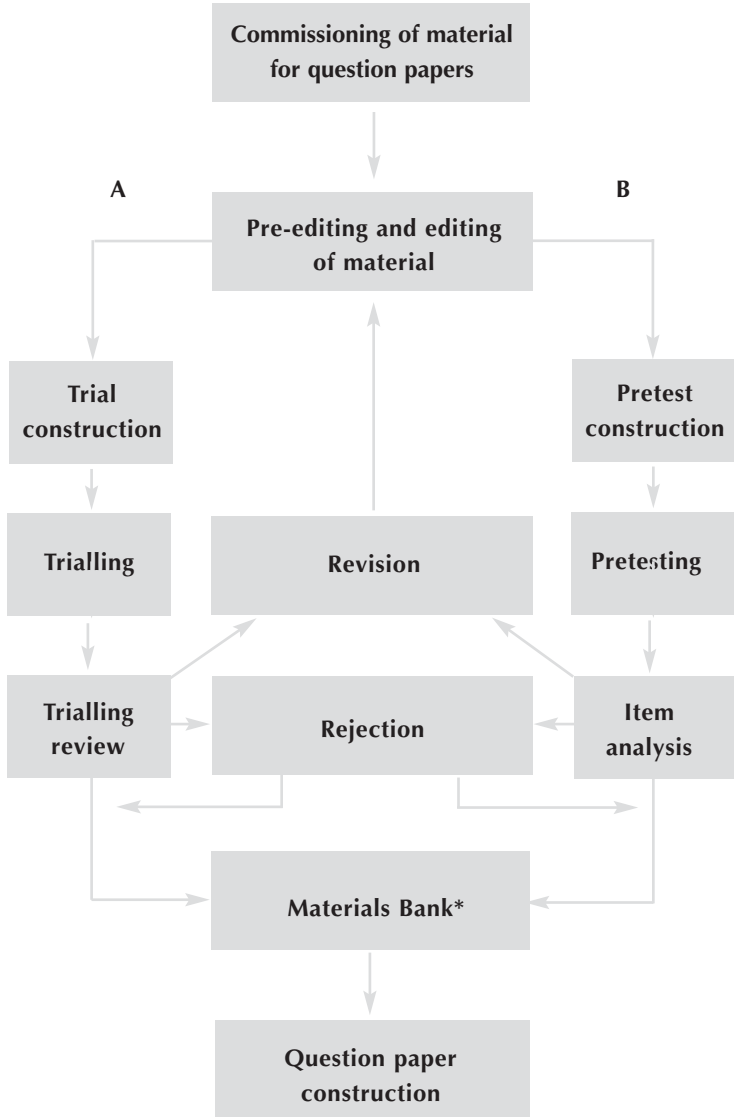
The Production of Cambridge ESOL Question Papers

The production process for question papers for Cambridge ESOL examinations begins with the commissioning of material and ends with the printing of question papers.

For the majority of Cambridge ESOL question papers there are five main stages in the production process:

- commissioning
- editing
- pretesting
- analysis and banking of material
- question paper construction.

This process is represented in the diagram below:



*electronic bank for pretested materials

Cambridge ESOL employs teams of item writers to produce examination material, and throughout the writing and editing process strict guidelines are followed in order to ensure that the materials conform to the test specifications. Topics or contexts of language use which might introduce a bias against any group of candidates of a particular background (i.e. on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, etc.) are avoided.

After selection and editing, the items are compiled into pretest papers. Pretesting plays a central role as it allows for questions and materials with known measurement characteristics to be banked so that new versions of question papers can be produced as and when required. The pretesting process helps to ensure that all versions conform to the test requirements in terms of content and level of difficulty.

Each pretest paper contains anchor items or is supplied to candidates with an additional anchor test. The anchor items are carefully chosen on the basis of their known measurement characteristics, and their inclusion means that all new items can be linked to a common scale of difficulty.

Pretest papers are despatched to a wide variety of schools and colleges which have offered to administer the pretests to candidates of a suitable level. After the completed pretests have been returned to the Pretesting Section at Cambridge ESOL, a score for each student is provided to the centre within two weeks of receiving the completed scripts. The items are marked and analysed, and those which are found to be suitable are banked.

Material for the productive components of the examinations is trialled with candidates to assess its suitability for inclusion in the Materials Bank.

Cambridge ESOL’s Provision for testing Business Language Skills

Cambridge ESOL offers two complementary products to cover a comprehensive range of business language testing needs.

The Business English Certificates (BEC) are certificated examinations which can be taken on various fixed dates at approved centres authorised for BEC. They are aimed primarily at individual learners who wish to obtain a business-related English language qualification, and provide an ideal focus for courses in Business English.

The Business Language Testing Service (BULATS) is non-certificated, and offers employers a quick, reliable and flexible method of assessing employees’ language skills.

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History of BEC

BEC was originally developed to meet a specific demand in the Asia-Pacific region for tests of English language in a business context. The tests were introduced there between 1993 and 1996.

In 1999, a review of the examination content and administration was begun in order to take into consideration recent developments in teaching and testing. The result of this review is the revised BEC, introduced in March 2002.

Recognition

Recognition of BEC is increasing rapidly as a growing number of companies are using the examination as a focus for in-company training courses. A list of companies that use the BEC examinations for a variety of purposes including recruitment can be found at www.CambridgeESOL.org/BEC

Many universities in the United Kingdom recognise BEC Higher as a suitable entry requirement for international students to business-related and other courses of study.

Further information concerning recognition of the examination is available from Cambridge ESOL Information.

BEC Candidature

In 2003 there were approximately 60,000 candidates for BEC in over 50 countries.

Examination Levels

The BEC suite is linked to the five ALTE/Cambridge levels for language assessment, and to the Council of Europe’s Framework for Modern Languages. It is also aligned with the UK Qualification and Curriculum Authority’s National Standards for Literacy, within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

| BEC | Equivalent Main Suite Exam | Council of Europe Level | UK NQF Level |
|------------------------|---|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| | Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) | C2 (ALTE level 5) | |
| BEC Higher | Certificate in Advanced English (CAE) | C1 (ALTE level 4) | Level 2* |
| BEC Vantage | First Certificate in English (FCE) | B2 (ALTE level 3) | Level 1 |
| BEC Preliminary | Preliminary English Test (PET) | B1 (ALTE level 2) | Entry 3 |
| | Key English Test (KET) | A2 (ALTE level 1) | |

* This represents the level typically required for employment purposes to signify the successful completion of compulsory secondary education in the UK.

At all three BEC levels, the ‘business’ aspect of this examination affects the vocabulary, the types of texts selected and the situations presented in the tasks. In addition, as in the Cambridge ESOL Main Suite exams, other skills, such as understanding the gist of a text or guessing unfamiliar words in a listening situation, are tested.

The ALTE Can-do Project

In a major ALTE project, a series of ‘can-do’ statements have been developed to describe what language users at each Council of Europe level are able to do in a particular language.

Statements are divided into three main subject areas: Social & Tourist, Work and Study. Within each subject area there are sets of statements relating to the following skills: Listening & Speaking, Reading, Writing.

The Work statements are clearly linked to use of English in business contexts. Social & Tourist and Study statements are relevant to business people when they are in related social situations or studying business or related subjects. Examples follow of some of the statements for each level.

Council of Europe Level B1 (BEC Preliminary): Example 'Can-do' Statements

| | Listening/Speaking | Reading | Writing |
|------------------------|---|--|--|
| Example can-dos | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can take and pass on most messages that are likely to require attention during a normal working day • Can take part in a routine meeting or seminar on familiar topics, exchanging factual information through question and answer or through receiving instructions • Can express her/his own opinion, and present arguments to a limited extent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand standard types of letters such as orders, complaints, appointments, enquiries, etc. and pass these on to the appropriate person for action • Can understand the general meaning of reports dealing with, for example, conditions and advice • Can understand instructions, procedures, etc. within own job area | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can write a non-routine letter where this is restricted to matters of fact • Can write a report of a factual nature, but if the report is for external consumption her/his work will require checking and correcting • Can draft straightforward instructions, regulations, etc. |

Council of Europe Level B2 (BEC Vantage): Example 'Can-do' Statements

| | Listening/Speaking | Reading | Writing |
|------------------------|--|---|---|
| Example can-dos | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can give detailed information and state detailed requirements within a familiar area of work • Can put his/her point across persuasively when talking, for example, about a familiar product • When making requests can deal with unpredictable replies and difficulties within her/his own immediate job area | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand correspondence expressed in non-standard language • Can, within a reasonably short period of time, understand most reports he/she is likely to come across • Can understand the intention of instructions etc. outside of a factual nature and begin to evaluate, advise, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can make notes that are useful to both him/herself and to colleagues • Can write most letters he/she is likely to be asked to do; such errors as occur will not prevent understanding of the message. • Can write a simple report |

Council of Europe Level C1 (BEC Higher): Example 'Can-do' Statements

| | Listening/Speaking | Reading | Writing |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| Example can-dos | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can ask questions outside own immediate area of work • Can argue her/his case effectively, justifying, if necessary, a need for a service and specifying needs precisely • Can argue effectively for or discuss against a case, and has sufficient language to be able to talk about most aspects of her/his work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can understand most articles likely to be encountered during the course of her/his work including complex ideas expressed in complex language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can handle a wide range of routine and non-routine situations in which professional services are requested from colleagues or external contacts • Can take reasonably accurate notes during meetings • Can write any type of letter necessary in the course of her/his work |

TOPIC AREAS

Materials used in the BEC suite of examinations relate to the areas of language use given below. The coverage of the topics is spread across the four components of each examination. In general terms, the topic areas are similar for each level, but a greater range of linguistic knowledge and degree of skill are required as the levels progress. Note, however, that certain topics will be more prevalent at certain levels, e.g. socialising and personal details are areas of language tested more at BEC Preliminary level.

TOPIC AREAS FUNCTIONS/COMMUNICATIVE TASKS

Personal identification

Greeting people and responding to greetings
 Introducing oneself and other people
 Asking for and giving personal details (name, occupation, etc.)
 Asking about and describing jobs and responsibilities
 Asking about and describing a company and its organisation
 Completing forms with personal or company details
 Understanding and writing letters which give personal details

The office, general business environment and routine

Arranging and re-arranging appointments and meetings
 Planning future events and tasks
 Confirming or changing plans
 Asking for and giving permission
 Giving and receiving instructions
 Predicting and describing future possibilities
 Asking for and giving opinions: agreeing and disagreeing
 Making, accepting and rejecting suggestions or recommendations
 Justifying decisions and past actions
 Understanding records of meetings
 Understanding office communications (reports, letters, memos, etc.)

Entertainment of clients, free time, relationships with colleagues and clients

Discussing interests and leisure activities
 Inviting, accepting and refusing offers and invitations
 Thanking and expressing appreciation
 Welcoming a foreign visitor
 Talking about own region/country
 Making, accepting and refusing offers

Travel and conference meetings

Making enquiries, reservations, orders and bookings
 Checking into and out of a hotel
 Following directions

Using the telephone

Giving and interpreting numerical data, common abbreviations and acronyms (as used in international business)
 Exchanging information
 Taking messages

Health and safety

Understanding health and safety rules in the workplace
 understanding instructions and notices

Buying and selling

Understanding prices and delivery dates
 Making and accepting offers
 Making agreements
 Negotiating contracts

Company structures, systems, processes

Presenting and describing company structures and processes
 Exchanging information on company facilities
 Understanding and explaining a company's production, ordering and delivery systems
 Understanding and explaining manufacturing processes
 Understanding and describing processes in one's company (including staff selection, promotion, etc.)
 Asking about and explaining errors

Products and services

Describing and presenting products
 Explaining how something works
 Asking for and giving information about a product or service
 Making comparisons, expressing opinions, preferences, etc.
 Making and receiving complaints
 Apologising and accepting apologies

Results and achievements

Describing and explaining company performance and results, trends, events and changes

Business issues

Understanding and talking about general business topics, such as management skills, promotional strategies, training courses, business services, etc.

Other topic areas

A number of other topic areas of general interest, such as food and drink, education (training, courses), consumer goods, shopping and prices, current events, places, weather, etc. may occur.

EXAM CONTENT: AN OVERVIEW

The BEC examinations cover the four language skills: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. In BEC Preliminary, the tests of Reading and Writing are combined on one question paper. In BEC Vantage and BEC Higher, there are separate Reading and Writing papers.

The BEC Suite

The table below indicates the common characteristics and variations at the different levels of the BEC suite.

| | BEC Preliminary | BEC Vantage | BEC Higher |
|------------------|--|--|--|
| Reading | 7 parts/45 items | 5 parts/45 items 1 hour | 6 parts/52 items 1 hour |
| Writing | 2 tasks 1 hour 30 minutes (NB Reading and Writing) | 2 tasks 45 minutes | 2 tasks 1 hour 10 minutes |
| Listening | 4 parts/30 items about 40 minutes including transfer time | 3 parts/30 items about 40 minutes including transfer time | 3 parts/30 items about 40 minutes including transfer time |
| Speaking | 3 parts 12 minutes (2:2 format*) | 3 parts 14 minutes (2:2 format*) | 3 parts 16 minutes (2:2 format*) |

*2 examiners, 2 candidates (2:3 format is used for the last group in a session where necessary)

ASSESSMENT

The methods of assessment used in the three BEC examinations are the same in principle at each level.

Reading and Listening

All answers for these components are assessed simply as right or wrong, with one mark available for each. Spelling should be correct, though some minor spelling errors in the listening test are tolerated at Preliminary and Vantage levels. Both British and American spellings are accepted.

Writing

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 gives detailed descriptions of performance at each of five levels of proficiency. In addition to this, a Task-specific Mark Scheme for each question gives guidance on the features an answer should contain.

Speaking

The standard test format is two candidates and two examiners: an assessor and an interlocutor.

Each examiner marks a candidate's performance independently. The interlocutor, who speaks to the candidates, gives a single mark based on a global achievement scale. The assessor gives four separate marks based on separate scales for grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation and interactive communication.

GRADING AND RESULTS

For each level of BEC, the individual papers total 120 marks, after weighting. Each skill (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) represents 25% of the total marks available.

Grading takes place once all scripts have been returned to Cambridge ESOL and marking is complete. The grade boundaries (the minimum score needed to achieve each grade) are set using the following information:

- statistics on the candidature
- statistics on the overall candidate performance
- statistics on individual items, for those parts of the examination for which this is appropriate (Reading and Listening)
- the Principal Examiner's report on the performance of candidates on the writing tasks
- comparison with statistics from previous years' examination performance and candidature.

A candidate's overall grade is based on the total score gained in all papers. It is not necessary to achieve a satisfactory level in each paper in order to pass the examination.

For BEC Preliminary, results are reported as two passing grades (Pass with Merit and Pass) and two failing grades (Narrow Fail and Fail). This follows the reporting model used by the Cambridge ESOL Main Suite test at the equivalent level (PET). The minimum successful performance which a candidate typically requires in order to achieve a pass for BEC Preliminary corresponds to about 65% of the total marks.

For BEC Vantage and BEC Higher, results are reported as three passing grades (A, B and C) and two failing grades (D and E). This follows the reporting model used by the Cambridge ESOL Main Suite tests at the equivalent level (FCE and CAE). The minimum successful performance which a candidate typically requires in order to achieve a Grade C corresponds to about 60% of the total marks.

For all levels of BEC, candidates receive statements of results which, in addition to their grades, show a graphical profile of their performance in each skill. These are shown against the scale Exceptional – Good – Borderline – Weak, and indicate the candidate's relative performance in each skill. Statements of results are issued through centres approximately seven weeks after the examination. Certificates are issued to passing candidates approximately four weeks after the issue of statements of results. There is no limit on the validity of the certificate.

Special Circumstances

Special Circumstances covers three main areas: Special Arrangements, Special Consideration and Malpractice.

Special Arrangements: These are available for candidates with a long-term disability such as hearing/sight impairment,

dyslexia or a speech impediment, or short-term difficulties such as a broken arm. They may include extra time, separate accommodation or equipment, Braille transcription, etc. Consult the Cambridge ESOL Local Secretary in your area for more details.

Special Consideration: Cambridge ESOL may give Special Consideration to candidates affected by adverse circumstances immediately before or during an examination. Applications for Special Consideration are submitted by centres and must be made within two weeks of the examination date.

Malpractice: The Malpractice Committee will consider cases where candidates are suspected of copying or collusion, or where other breaches of exam regulations are reported. Results may be withheld pending further investigation. Centres are notified if a candidate is suspected of malpractice.

ANSWER SHEETS

Candidates record their answers to the Reading and Listening components on Answer Sheets designed to be machine read.

For the Reading component, candidates may, if they wish, write the answers on their exam paper first, but must transfer those answers to their Answer Sheet before the end of the test.

For the Listening test, candidates write on their exam papers as they listen. When the final task ends they are allowed an extra ten minutes to transfer answers to their Answer Sheet.

A soft or medium pencil must be used for recording marks on Answer Sheets. If an answer needs to be changed, an eraser should be used.

Where questions require candidates to choose an option, answers are recorded by shading one of the lozenges on the Answer Sheet. Where the production of a word or phrase is required, candidates write each letter (or numeral, punctuation mark, etc.) in a separate box on the Answer Sheet. Each letter should be written as a CAPITAL.

For BEC Preliminary, answers for the Writing component are also written in pencil on an Answer Sheet, although these Answer Sheets have lines rather than individual boxes for candidates' responses. Answers for the Writing component are marked by examiners, and candidates write in normal handwriting.

For BEC Vantage and BEC Higher, answers for the Writing component are written in pen in the question paper booklet.

Answer Sheets are reproduced in this handbook within the detailed guide to each test.

TEST OF READING AND WRITING

Time: 1 hour 30 minutes

| READING | | | | |
|---------|--|--|--|---------------------------|
| PART | Main Skill Focus | Input | Response | Number of questions |
| 1 | Reading – understanding short, real world notices, messages, etc. | Notices, messages, adverts, leaflets, etc. | Multiple choice | 5 |
| 2 | Reading – detailed comprehension of factual material; skimming and scanning skills | Notice, list, plan, contents page, etc. | Matching | 5 |
| 3 | Reading – interpreting visual information | Graphs, charts, tables, etc. (The information may be presented in 8 separate graphics or in a composite graphic comprising up to 3 visuals. | Matching | 5 |
| 4 | Reading for detailed factual information | Text (approx. 150 – 200 words): advert, business letter, product description, report, minutes, etc. | Right/Wrong/ Doesn't say | 7 |
| 5 | Reading for gist and specific information | Text (approx. 300 – 400 words): newspaper or magazine article, advert, report, leaflet, etc. | Multiple choice | 6 |
| 6 | Reading – grammatical accuracy and understanding of text structure | Text (approx. 125 – 150 words): newspaper or magazine article, advert, leaflet, etc. | Multiple choice cloze | 12 |
| 7 | Reading and information transfer | Short memos, letters, notices, adverts, etc. | Form-filling, note completion | 5 |
| WRITING | | | | |
| PART | Functions/Communicative Task | Input | Response | Register |
| 1 | e.g. (re-)arranging appointments, asking for permission, giving instructions | Rubric only (plus layout of output text type) | Internal communication (medium may be note, message, memo or e-mail) (30 – 40 words) | Neutral/ formal/ informal |
| 2 | e.g. apologising and offering compensation, making or altering reservations, dealing with requests, giving information about a product | One piece of input which may be business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or e-mail), internal communication (medium may be note, memo or e-mail), notice, advert, etc. (plus layout of output text type) | Business correspondence (medium may be letter, fax or e-mail) (60 – 80 words) | Neutral/ formal |