

# Exam Skills

## The Insider Guide to Cambridge ESOL exams

*Business English Certificates (BEC)*

By the Cambridge ESOL Exam Board

**The Insider Guides to Cambridge ESOL exams****Introduction**

There are lots of myths about English language exams.

You may hear people talk about trick questions which are planted in papers to catch you out, how exercises are constantly recycled, how exams are made up in a matter of hours.

Actually, the development of exams at Cambridge ESOL is a huge job. It involves teams of researchers and an international network of thousands of writers and examiners. They make sure each exam is fair and a reliable guide to what level candidates have reached in the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and in their use of English.

Every test is different and is designed to examine very specific skills. That's why test takers can benefit from knowing more about the particular exam they will be sitting and what examiners are really looking for.

In these pages you will find guides to how you can do your best in the world-renowned English language exams provided by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations.

The guides provide tips on what each exam is looking for from you – as well as advice straight from the examiners.

## The Insider Guides to Cambridge ESOL exams

### Business English Certificates (BEC)

#### Introduction

An internationally recognised qualification like one of the Business English Certificates (BEC) can give you an advantage in the job market or help with your plans to work overseas.

You can see the kinds of companies and organisations which recognise BEC here: [http://www.cambridgeesol.org/support/recog/recog\\_bec\\_corp.pdf](http://www.cambridgeesol.org/support/recog/recog_bec_corp.pdf)

There are three BEC exams - BEC Preliminary, BEC Vantage and BEC Higher - which test English language ability used in a business context at Council of Europe levels B1, B2 and C1 respectively.

BEC Preliminary involves three papers, for BEC Vantage and BEC Higher you need to sit four.

The BEC Preliminary papers are:

**Reading and Writing** (1 hour and 20 minutes – Reading includes seven tasks, like a multiple choice test and a gap-filling exercise; in the Writing test you'll be asked to produce two short pieces relating to business);

**Listening** (around 40 minutes – based on input such as interviews, discussions and telephone conversations of the type you might be involved in at work);

**Speaking** (around 12 minutes – you do this part with one other candidate, giving a 'mini-presentation' and discussing business issues with the other candidate and the examiner).

The task types are similar for BEC Vantage and BEC Higher, but aimed at a higher level of language.

For BEC Vantage the papers are:

**Reading** (1 hour);

**Writing** (45 minutes);

**Listening** (around 40 minutes);

**Speaking** (around 14 minutes).

The papers for BEC Higher are:

**Reading** (1 hour);  
**Writing** (1 hour 10 minutes);  
**Listening** (around 40 minutes);  
**Speaking** (around 16 minutes).

Here's how you can do the best you can in each paper.

### **Reading**

This paper will be looking at your ability to understand business-related texts at word, phrase, sentence and paragraph level, and your knowledge and control of the language system.

You will need to identify the purpose of each task and to apply the appropriate approach.

You may need to read quickly or slowly, skimming for the general ideas or scanning for a specific point. For example, when you read an instruction manual on how to mend the photocopier, you read for detailed understanding, but when you are looking through your 'in-tray' of materials it is just to find the main points.

### **Writing**

Where you can, try to use a range of business words and expressions that are often used in the workplace.

In the appropriate tasks, include some good linking words such as 'firstly', 'also', 'however', 'moreover' and 'nevertheless', as these help to provide some structure.

Don't waste time writing addresses for a letter, as they are not required.

### **Listening**

Use the preparation time before each text is played to read through the question and think about the context.

Use the information on the page to help you follow the text.

Don't spend too long thinking about a question - leave it until the second listening.

### **Speaking**

Get plenty of speaking practice in small groups, especially on topics likely to be used in the exam.

Collect and keep records of words and phrases useful for carrying out the exam tasks.

Don't worry too much about making mistakes - you don't have to be word perfect.

More information on the BEC exam is available from [www.CambridgeESOL.org](http://www.CambridgeESOL.org)

Cambridge ESOL oral examiner, Jill Bugey, says:

“In general, I would say the most important thing is to be yourself and really show what you can do in English. Speaking clearly and loudly enough and making sure your language is easy to understand are both very important, especially when the subject matter may be rather complex. Take a full and active part in the test and always ask if you’re not totally sure what to do: this won’t affect your mark in any way. Make sure you’re familiar with the test format (you can watch a video available from Cambridge ESOL), and don’t worry if you forget or don’t know a word: just try to explain what you mean using different words.

It’s really vital to make a good impression at the beginning and give some appropriate detail when asked about yourself and your work or study. It might seem like a good idea to rehearse with your partner and prepare your answers in advance, but this never sounds natural so can be counter-productive. The examiner is looking for genuine interaction throughout the test. In BEC Preliminary in particular, there’s no need to give long answers to the questions in the first part of the test. It’s best to keep your answers short and relevant.

In the second part when you give your mini-presentation, it’s really important to use the preparation time to organise your thoughts. You don’t have to write anything down if you don’t want to, but just making some brief notes of the main points you want to mention is a very good idea. Whatever you do, don’t try to write everything down – you just haven’t got time for that. You may not know that Topic A is always more general and more suitable for you if you haven’t already worked in business. Topic C (in Vantage and Higher) is really only suitable for those with knowledge of a particular business area, so choose your topic carefully, but don’t spend too long deciding!

In the discussion part, make sure you give your own views as well as asking your partner for theirs. Don’t worry if you don’t agree with your partner, but try to understand their point of view. Make sure you look at your partner in this section and not the examiner, who doesn’t speak at all here. The examiner’s follow-up questions are the final chance you have to show what you can do, so do try to give full and appropriate answers, using personal

experience if you can, and try to involve your partner too to keep the discussion going.

Finally, don't be surprised if the examiner interrupts you before you have finished speaking – they have to keep to strict timing in the tests.

I wish you all good luck in the exam!”