

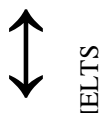
BUSINESS ENGLISH CERTIFICATES (BEC)

Monica DOBRE-LAZA*

Background

The Business English Certificates are provided by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), a world-leader in educational assessment. This department of the University of Cambridge was established in 1858 and offers a wide range of examinations and assessment services throughout the world.

BEC forms part of the range of Cambridge

ALTE/Cambridge Level	<i>General English</i>	English for Business	<i>English for academic and training purposes</i>
5 Good user	Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)	-	9 band scale  IELTS
4 Competent User	Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)	BEC 3	
3 Independent User	First Certificate of English (FCE)	BEC 2	
2 Threshold Level User	Preliminary English Test (PET)	BEC 1	
1 Waystage Level User	Key English Test (KET)	-	

The range of Cambridge EFL examinations

BEC was originally developed to meet a specific demand in the Asia-Pacific region, with BEC 1 being launched there in 1993. BEC 2 and BEC 3 were added over the following three years and in 1998 the BEC suite was introduced in Europe.

All BEC examinations are based on an extensive programme of research and validation, and are assessed according to rigorous criteria designed to deliver assessment of the highest possible standards of integrity, reliability and fairness.

The Business English Certificates (BEC) are certificated examinations (which means they have unlimited validity) and can be taken on six fixed dates per year at approved BEC centres. The only approved

Examinations in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), which together attract over 600,000 candidates every year, in more than 135 countries. Of these, BEC candidates accounted for about 6% in 1999.

BEC is linked to the five level scale for language assessment established by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), of which UCLES is a member, as presented in the table below:

centre in Romania is the British Council.

Description

The BEC suite of examinations offers an English language qualification for learners wishing to use English for purposes of international business. They are practical examinations that focus on the application of language in real-world business situations. BEC examinations are aimed primarily at individual learners and provide an ideal focus for courses in Business English.

There are three BEC levels, at present called BEC1,

* Examinations Services Manager, British Council Romania

BEC2 and BEC3. The revision of BEC examinations is under way and the revised products – renamed *BEC Preliminary*, *BEC Vantage* and *BEC Higher* - will be launched in March 2002.

BEC1 is aimed at the elementary and lower-intermediate levels of competence and is intended for students working in business or preparing for a career in business. BEC1 is also designed to encourage the development of the skills required by students progressing towards BEC2.

BEC2 is aimed at an intermediate level of competence and is intended for people working in business or preparing for a career in business. BEC2 is also designed to encourage the development of the skills required by students progressing towards BEC3.

BEC3 is an advanced level of competence and, like BEC2, is intended for people who are either already in business-oriented work or preparing to pursue such a career.

At all three levels, the materials and tasks are accessible to candidates who have experience of, or are interested in entering, a range of business fields, including marketing, production, financial services and general office work.

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 UCLES General English exams, other skills such as understanding the gist of a text or guessing unfamiliar words in a listening situation are tested.

All three levels of BEC assess candidates’ ability to use English for a wide range of work-related functions, such as: asking for and giving personal details; arranging appointments and meetings; understanding office communications (reports, letters, memos, etc); welcoming foreign visitors; making enquiries/reservations/ bookings; taking phone messages; understanding and explaining a company’s production/ordering/ delivery systems; asking for and giving information about a product or service etc.

Examination Content and Results

The BEC examinations cover the four language skills: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking.

Topics covered in the BEC suite of examinations and spread across the four components include: personal identification; the office, general business environment and routine; entertainment of clients, free time, relationships with colleagues and clients; travel and meetings; using the telephone; health and safety; buying and selling; company structures, systems, processes; products and services; results and achievements; business issues.

Task types for the four components include:

Reading

- Multiple choice comprehension questions about short messages, adverts, articles, reports etc.
- Matching descriptions with key vocabulary or with graphs/charts
- Gap-filling tasks to test understanding of text structure
- Gap-filling tasks to test grammatical accuracy and range of vocabulary
- Error-correction tasks

Writing

- Writing short messages
- Writing letters or reports

Listening

- Completing messages/forms using information heard
- Matching short extracts with descriptions of their general topic or gist
- Multiple choice comprehension questions about conversations, interviews or presentations

Speaking

- Engaging in a conversation with the examiner about your work and interests
- Exchanging information with another candidate on work-related topics
- Discussing general work-related topics.

From the point of view of grading and results, the four components are integrated. However, two separate grades are given, one for Reading, Writing and Listening, successful candidates being awarded a certificate and one for Speaking. It is possible for a candidate to receive a certificate without passing the Speaking test.

Recognition

Corporate recognition (or recognition for employment purposes) is increasing rapidly as more and more companies use BEC for recruitment, promotion, focus for in-company training courses etc. BEC examinations provide an independent objective assessment of an employee or potential employee's ability.

At the same time, it is used by individuals to improve their employment opportunities. A study carried out a year ago showed that 70% of BEC 1 candidates are in work.

Recognition for academic purposes is also becoming important in the United Kingdom. BEC 3 is already recognised by 52 British universities as a suitable entry requirement for international students to business-related and other courses of study.

BEC in Romania

The British Council Bucharest organised the first BEC examinations in May 1999, for a group of 17 candidates. In May 2001 there were 63 candidates and the estimated growth for next year is 30%.

Romania has always been in the top from the point of view of pass rates in Cambridge examinations and this is also true of BEC. The overall pass rate in May 2001 was 77.68%.

For more information contact the British Council, Examinations Section, Calea Dorobantilor 14, 71132 Bucharest, tel.01-210031/2111900 or fax 01-2100310 or www.britishcouncil.ro