

Test Review

Business English Certificate (BEC)

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Test information	
Test Name:	Business English Certificate (BEC)
Price:	¥580 CNY (about \$83 USD) for BEC Preliminary ¥720 CNY (about \$103 USD) for BEC Vantage ¥910 CNY (about \$130 USD) for BEC Higher
Author and Publisher:	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), Cambridge University, Cambridge, United Kingdom; The National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA), Ministry of Education, Beijing, People's Republic of China (PRC).
Purpose:	To assess the English language proficiency of Chinese individuals in a business context.
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1. Background

The Business English Certificate (BEC) is a global business English qualification designed for learners of English in the workplace or those about to enter the workplace and is designed to test candidates' ability to communicate in English in a real-work setting. Cambridge Assessment International Education is the entity responsible for setting, marking, and awarding the BEC. The BEC was first introduced to China by the National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA) in 1993 and has since been entrusted with tasks such as registration, printing, and other related examinations.

The certificate from the BEC holds significant value and is acknowledged by various international organizations and academic institutes as a credible testament to one's language proficiency. Acquiring a certificate from the BEC can serve as evidence of an individual's adeptness in using English for business communication, which can be advantageous in impressing prospective employers and academic institutes. The list of BEC-accredited organizations in China comprises notable entities such as Adidas, Shell, Tesco, Walmart, Procter & Gamble, and the China Railway Engineering Corporation etc.

2. Description of the test

2.1 Range of the BEC

The BEC can be utilized as a stratified approach that appeals to individuals who aspire to enhance their competence in business English. The approach consists of three levels, namely, the Preliminary, Vantage, and Higher levels, which have been developed to facilitate the gradual improvement of learners' proficiency in business English. Through the implementation of this strategy, individuals can enhance their linguistic ability in a methodical and organized manner, ultimately resulting in enhanced connections exchange and heightened professional efficiency. The aforementioned levels demonstrate a strong correlation with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Each level corresponds to a separate level of English proficiency, spanning from intermediate to advanced. The Preliminary level has been designated at the B1 proficiency level. Obtaining a certificate at this proficiency level serves as evidence that the candidate possesses the ability to effectively engage in communication with candidates who are native speakers of the language, particularly in the context of routine business and workplace interactions. The Vantage level is designed to be at a proficiency level of B2. Acquiring a certificate at this level provides substantiation that the candidate is enhancing their proficiency

in utilizing Business English. The Higher certification is designed for candidates who have attained Level C1 proficiency, which is the second-highest level on the CEFR scale. Alignment to the CEFR brings the advantage of adding meaning to test scores (Kane, 2012, p. 8) as the CEFR can-do statements can be used to report what learners can do at a certain proficiency level.

2.2 Content of the BEC

The BEC comprises multiple sections that evaluate diverse linguistic competencies within a business setting. The reading section evaluates the proficiency of candidates in comprehending and analyzing written materials pertaining to business, including but not limited to articles, reports, correspondence, emails, and advertisements. The writing section mandates that candidates showcase their proficiency in diverse forms of commercial communication, such as letters, memos, reports, proposals, and summaries. The main focus is placed on the proficient transmission of ideas, systematic arrangement of data, and the utilization of suitable language and structure. The listening section evaluates the candidates' comprehension of spoken English in professional contexts via audio recordings of dialogues, interviews, lectures and meetings, accompanied by related questions. The speaking section evaluates the proficiency of candidates in conveying information verbally within a business context. This process entails engaging in direct verbal exchanges with an evaluator, actively taking part in conversations, articulating viewpoints, delivering concise speeches, and responding to requests related to business matters. In the speaking section of the BEC, typically two examiners are employed. One examiner acts as the interlocutor, who guides the conversation and asks questions, while the other examiner serves as the assessor, who evaluates the candidate's performance. The interlocutor and assessor work together to ensure a fair and comprehensive assessment of the candidate's speaking abilities. This dual-examiner approach helps provide a more objective evaluation and maintain consistency in the assessment process.

The scoring is based on a scale of 0-100, with 60 being the minimum passing score for each level. Each of the four categories is given a separate score, and the total score is the average of these four scores. The scores are reported as a percentage, with 100% being the highest possible score. A single grade is given based on the aggregate scores from the four sections. The following Table 1 describe the BEC structure.

Table 1

Description of the BEC structure

	BEC Preliminary (B1)	BEC Vantage (B2)	BEC Higher (C1)
	<i>90 mins</i>		<i>60 mins</i>
Reading	Part 1: Five short texts each followed by a multiple-choice question Part 2: Match questions to parts of a text Part 3: Match questions to parts of a graphic Part 4: Text and questions: Right/Wrong/Do not say Part 5: Text and multiple-choice questions Part 6: Text with multiple choice gaps Part 7: Note completion	Part 1: Matching seven sentences to four short texts Part 2: Text with sentences missing Part 3: Text with multiple choice questions Part 4: Text with multiple choice gaps Part 5: Identification of additional unnecessary words in text	Part 1: Matching eight sentences to five short texts Part 2: Text with sentences missing Part 3: Text with multiple choice questions Part 4: Text with multiple choice gaps Part 5: Text with gaps Part 6: Identification of additional unnecessary words in text
	<i>45 mins</i>		<i>70 mins</i>
Writing	Part 1: (30-40 words) Internal communication such as email or memo Part 2: (60-80 words)	Part 1: (40-50 words) Internal communication Part 2: (120-140 words)	Part 1: (120-140 words) Short report based on graphic input Part 2: (200-250 words) Report, proposal and business correspondence

	BEC Preliminary (B1)	BEC Vantage (B2)	BEC Higher (C1)
	Business communication based on a reading passage	Short report, proposal and business correspondence	
	40 mins	40 mins	
Listening	Part 1: Multiple choice Part 2: Note completion, numbers and letters Part 3: Note completion Part 4: Multiple choice	Part 1: Note completion, three short passages Part 2: Matching Part 3: Multiple choice	
	12 mins	14 mins	16 mins
Speaking	Part 1: Interview by responding to questions (<i>human</i>) Part 2: Short talk, then asking each other questions about the talk (<i>human</i>) Part 3: Collaborative task and discussion (<i>human</i>)		

(Note: adapted from Exam English at https://www.examenglish.com/BEC/BEC_Higher.html)

3. Analysis of the BEC

Bachman and Palmer (1996) introduced the idea that a comprehensive framework for evaluating the efficacy of assessments should encompass attributes such as reliability, construct validity, authenticity, impact and practicality. Numerous studies in the field of language testing have relied on Bachman and Palmer's (1996) framework of test usefulness as a crucial factor in the development and implementation of language assessments.

In the context of the BEC, the test's consistency can be ensured if it is administered to the same individual or group under comparable conditions, resulting in consistent outcomes. To guarantee the reliability, the BEC adheres to standardized protocols, which encompass consistent administration of tests, uniform scoring, and marking criteria.

Validity pertains to the degree to which an assessment instrument accurately assesses the construct it is designed to measure. The term validity concerns the assessment of its ability to accurately measure the linguistic competencies and skills that are crucial for proficient communication in the workplace. Thorough research and meticulous test development, procedures are employed to ensure that the content of the BEC is in accordance with the requirements of practical business communication. The test items have been specifically crafted to assess pragmatic language abilities that are pertinent to the professional environment, thereby augmenting the authenticity of the certification. The BEC endeavors to

integrate genuine business situations and tasks within its examination structure. The reading and listening parts encompass materials in the form of written documents and audio recordings that simulate authentic business-related materials such as reports, presentations, and conversational exchanges.

The authenticity of the test aids in the development of capacities that are closely linked to the obstacles that individuals may confront in the corporate realm. The significance of the BEC pertains to its effect on the lives, professional paths, and academic prospects of candidates. Acquiring the certificate can potentially augment the employability of candidates by validating their proficiency in the English language in a professional context. Gaining mastery over the English language has the potential to enhance one's employability by providing access to job opportunities that require a high level of English proficiency or by conferring a competitive advantage during recruitment processes.

The BEC is proctored at duly authorized testing centers situated in China, thereby providing examinees with a convenient testing venue. The tests employ uniform rules and unambiguous instructions for administering the test, guaranteeing uniformity among diverse testing centers. The evaluation as well as the interpretation of the test's scores are grounded on predetermined criteria established by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), thereby enabling a clear and unambiguous assessment.

4. Conclusions

According to recent surveys from Beijing Foreign Studies University (2022), the pass rate of the BEC in China is significantly lower than the average pass rate of 57%-58% observed in other countries (such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S), with a mere 37% pass rate. The observed disparity in the pass rates underscores the necessity for additional scrutiny and enhancement of the BEC examination mechanism in China. The BEC is held twice a year, scheduled in May and November, and candidates can apply for more than one level of BEC. With a price range of approximately \$83 USD to \$130 USD, the BEC is generally less expensive than both IELTS (\$215 USD) and TOEFL (\$195 USD).

The reason why the BEC is legitimate is that it serves as proof of the English language proficiency of the test-takers in a business context for a lifetime. In sum, the author posits that there is a need to augment the frequency of future examinations to cater for the growing number of Chinese candidates. However, despite being priced lower than IELTS and TOEFL, the cost of the BEC remains relatively high compared to the Chinese income, which may potentially impose a financial strain on Chinese candidates.

References

- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. Oxford University Press.
- Beijing Foreign Studies University (2022, October 16). *BEC surpasses IELTS as China's second largest overseas English test*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnhsj.com.cn/News/?id=06fab02-49c7-4019-b532-d3c8ea379868>
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