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CambridgeESOL: Business English Certificates (BEC)

To BEC or not to BEC? That is the question.

If one takes a look at the Cambridge ESOL website at the [list of companies in Austria](#) that recognise or use BEC exams one would get the impression that the Cambridge Business English Certificates had fully established themselves on the Austrian Market and that large companies employers had been fully convinced of the benefits of these exams.

My research into the matter however suggests otherwise. There is no doubt individuals from many Austrian companies have taken a Business English Certificate exam. However, what I do dispute is whether there are more than a handful of companies in Austria which have institutionalised the use of BEC, as is suggested by the long list published on the Cambridge ESOL website, for example as a benchmarking tool, or as a tool for recruitment purposes throughout the company.

What are the main arguments for companies recognising and using BEC exams?



- The three Business English Certificates offered are aligned with Levels B1 to C1 of the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) — an internationally recognised benchmark of language ability. If a company recognises the exams, they can more easily demand a certain level of proficiency for a particular position, putting the onus on the employee to ensure that his language level is in keeping with the demands of the job. For example, it can demand that for positions within the company in which one needs to negotiate at a high level, BEC Higher (C1) is obligatory.
- Language courses with a specific aim, such as a certificate giving a clearly recognisable Level (B1 - C1), can have a positive effect on motivation and performance. The BEC exams require candidates to read, listen, write and speak in a business context. In the preparation courses the focus therefore is on developing these skills, which when improved will clearly be of benefit to the course participant who has taken the exam, and subsequently also the company, which has paid for the course.

The above benefits in my opinion seem clear. Why then have companies not seized the opportunity to use the CEFR as a benchmark for language ability within the company, or run BEC courses with their focus on developing important skills and attaining a defined level of proficiency according to the CEFR?

I think it is because they are of the opinion that firstly, the needs-oriented courses that the quality language schools offer are more beneficial, and secondly, they feel that whether an employee's language level is B1, B2 or C1 is fairly irrelevant – what is more important is that they are capable and confident of doing the jobs that are required of them effectively in English. A needs-oriented course giving the participants the opportunity to develop the skills and the language they require will therefore be of more use to them than knowing what level they are on the CEFR. This is a point of view that, I have to admit, I also can identify with.

I look forward to hearing your views (in English or in German) on any of the issues that I have raised here.

Online References

<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/recognition/results.php?region=Austria&type=&BEC=on>
<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/exams-info/cefr.html>