

Corporate Strategy Dialogue Lab

Realistic corporate-strategy workplace dialogues, role-play cards, and debrief prompts for advanced ESL learners

Audience: instructors, strategy English coaches, corporate strategy teams, internal consulting groups, transformation teams, and peer practice cohorts

Focus: high-level professional English for corporate strategy workplaces, including strategic diagnosis, where-to-play and how-to-win choices, tradeoffs, industry structure, competitive advantage, portfolio strategy, resource allocation, growth strategy, M&A logic, uncertainty, scenarios, operating model, OKRs, executive narratives, and board-level dialogue.

Designed for advanced ESL learners who work in corporate strategy, business strategy, CEO office, transformation, corporate development, strategic finance, internal consulting, product strategy, commercial strategy, or strategy-adjacent leadership roles.

Teaching stance: corporate strategy English is the language of consequential choice. Learners need to frame ambiguous problems, make tradeoffs explicit, connect analysis to decisions, challenge attractive but incoherent ideas, and communicate uncertainty without sounding weak. This course teaches professional communication and judgment, not a single best strategy framework.

How to Run the Dialogue Lab

1. Use groups of three: strategist, executive stakeholder, observer.
2. Read the model dialogue once. Then replay it with a different market, business unit, acquisition target, uncertainty level, or political constraint.
3. The observer listens for decision framing, tradeoff language, evidence discipline, value logic, uncertainty clarity, and executive next steps.
4. After each role-play, replay the hardest 30 seconds with a more precise strategy sentence.

Facilitator guardrail

Do not let learners hide behind frameworks. Ask them to state the decision, recommendation, evidence, tradeoff, resource implication, and what would change their mind.

1. CEO Request: 'We Need a Strategy'

Setting

The CEO asks the strategy team for a strategy, but the request sounds like a list of initiatives.

Speaker	Line
CEO	We need a strategy for next year. Give me the top twenty initiatives.
Strategy lead	We can build the initiative list, but first we need the strategic choice behind it.
ESL learner	If the output is only a project list, we may miss the real decision. Are we trying to defend the core, enter a new segment, improve margins, or shift resources toward higher-growth businesses?
CEO	All of the above.
ESL learner	Then the first decision is prioritization. We should define the few choices that matter most, the tradeoffs they imply, and the resources that must move.

Language notes

- Strategy language should separate choices from activities.
- A broad CEO request often needs reframing before analysis begins.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

2. Where-to-Play Debate: Enterprise vs Mid-Market

Setting

A leadership team is debating whether to prioritize enterprise customers or mid-market customers.

Speaker	Line
CRO	Enterprise logos create credibility. We should focus there.
Product head	Mid-market customers adopt faster and need fewer custom features.
ESL learner	The where-to-play choice affects product roadmap, sales motion, implementation cost, pricing, and support model. Enterprise may increase contract value, but mid-market may improve velocity and margins.
CRO	Can we do both?
ESL learner	Possibly, but not with the same operating model. If we choose both, we need explicit segmentation and different service levels, not one vague strategy.

Language notes

- Where-to-play choices change capabilities and economics.
- Doing both can be valid only if the operating model supports it.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

3. Five Forces: Growth Does Not Mean Profit

Setting

A team wants to enter a fast-growing market but has not examined industry structure.

Speaker	Line
Business unit GM	The market is growing 18 percent. We should enter quickly.
Analyst	Growth is strong, but supplier power and buyer power are also high.
ESL learner	Market growth is attractive, but the profit pool may be weak. If buyers can switch easily, suppliers control key inputs, and substitutes are improving, growth may not translate into returns.
GM	So you are saying no?
ESL learner	Not necessarily. I am saying entry needs a clear position, a barrier we can build, and economics that survive competitive pressure.

Language notes

- Industry attractiveness requires more than growth rate.
- Use Five Forces to discuss value capture, not just competition.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

4. Portfolio Review: Protect the Core or Fund the New Bet

Setting

A mature business funds the company, but a new opportunity needs investment.

Speaker	Line
Core BU leader	Our unit generates the cash. Cutting our budget will damage the business.
Innovation lead	Without investment, the new platform will miss the window.
ESL learner	The portfolio question is not which team deserves funding. It is what role each business plays. The core must remain healthy, but some resources may need to shift if the new platform is the stronger future value pool.
Core BU leader	That sounds like punishing performance.
ESL learner	I would frame it as funding enterprise value. We should define the minimum investment to protect the core and the incremental investment needed to test the new platform's thesis.

Language notes

- Portfolio language should reduce personal defensiveness.
- Resource allocation must connect to enterprise value, not politics.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

5. Resource Allocation: Everyone Wants Flat Growth

Setting

Every business unit requests a similar budget increase despite different performance and market opportunities.

Speaker	Line
CFO	Every BU is asking for 8 percent more. That is not a strategy.
BU leader	We all have growth plans.
ESL learner	Equal increases may feel fair, but they ignore opportunity cost. We should allocate based on market attractiveness, advantage, capital intensity, confidence in execution, and strategic role.
BU leader	My team will see that as a cut.
ESL learner	Then we need transparent decision rules. Some units may get growth capital, some may get productivity targets, and some may need option funding rather than full-scale investment.

Language notes

- Fairness language can hide strategic inertia.
- Decision rules help make resource shifts defensible.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

6. Market Entry: Build, Buy, or Partner

Setting

The company wants to enter an adjacent market but lacks several capabilities.

Speaker	Line
Corporate development	We can acquire a player and accelerate entry.
Operations	Integration could distract the organization for two years.
ESL learner	The route depends on speed, control, capability gap, integration risk, and economics. Build gives control but may be slow. Buy gives access but may overpay. Partner creates optionality but limits control.
CEO	What do you recommend?
ESL learner	Start with a partnership to validate demand and operating requirements, while screening acquisition targets if the thesis proves attractive.

Language notes

- Build-buy-partner language should compare route, not just preference.
- Options can be a strategy under uncertainty.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

7. M&A Synergy Challenge

Setting

A deal team presents synergy estimates that sound optimistic.

Speaker	Line
Deal lead	The acquisition creates 60 million in annual synergies.
CFO	Where exactly do those synergies come from?
ESL learner	We should separate revenue synergies, cost synergies, tax or procurement benefits, and capability synergies. Each needs an owner, timing, one-time cost, and confidence level.
Deal lead	The revenue synergies are strategic.
ESL learner	Strategic is not enough. Which customers, which products, which channel, what attach rate, and what evidence tells us the combined company can capture it?

Language notes

- Synergy language should move from headline value to source, timing, owner, and evidence.
- Revenue synergies usually need especially careful challenge.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

8. Scenario Planning: Regulatory Uncertainty

Setting

A new regulation could change the economics of a business model.

Speaker	Line
General counsel	We do not know how the rule will be finalized.
Strategy director	Then we need scenarios.
ESL learner	Let's build only scenarios that would change our decision. For each one, we need trigger indicators, financial impact, operational implications, and moves that are no-regrets across scenarios.
CEO	What can we do now?
ESL learner	We can reduce exposure in the highest-risk product, invest in compliance capability, and create an option to shift the model if the strict scenario becomes more likely.

Language notes

- Scenario planning should guide decisions, not decorate decks.
- Use trigger indicators to avoid passive waiting.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

9. Strategy vs Operational Effectiveness

Setting

A cost-reduction program is being presented as the company's strategy.

Speaker	Line
COO	Our strategy is to improve productivity by 12 percent.
Strategy lead	That is important, but it may be operational effectiveness rather than strategy.
ESL learner	Productivity improvement can support strategy, but it does not answer where we will compete differently or how we will win. We need to connect the cost program to a position: lower-cost leadership, reinvestment in growth, or a more focused operating model.
COO	So the cost program is not strategic?
ESL learner	It can be strategic if it enables a choice. By itself, it is an initiative with financial benefit.

Language notes

- Operational improvement can be valuable without being the whole strategy.
- The learner should avoid sounding dismissive while clarifying the distinction.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

10. KPI Conflict: Activity Metrics vs Strategic Outcomes

Setting

A transformation dashboard shows many green projects, but business results are flat.

Speaker	Line
Transformation office	Ninety percent of initiatives are on track.
CEO	Then why is margin not improving?
ESL learner	The dashboard may be tracking activity rather than value. We need to link initiatives to value drivers: price, volume, mix, cost-to-serve, retention, working capital, and capital intensity.
Transformation office	The teams like milestone tracking.
ESL learner	Milestones are useful, but the executive dashboard should show whether strategic outcomes are moving, not just whether workstreams are busy.

Language notes

- Green status can hide weak value delivery.
- Strategic KPIs should connect to value drivers.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

11. Board Deck: Too Much Analysis, No Decision

Setting

The strategy team has a 70-page deck but no clear board decision.

Speaker	Line
Board chair	What decision do you need from us?
Strategy VP	We wanted to share the full market analysis.
ESL learner	The analysis supports one decision: whether to shift 200 million from legacy expansion to the digital platform over three years. The board needs the strategic logic, downside case, risk controls, and milestones for releasing capital.
Board chair	Then lead with that.
ESL learner	Agreed. We can move the market detail to appendix and open with the choice, recommendation, and resource implications.

Language notes

- Board communication should be decision-led.
- Appendix detail should support the recommendation, not bury it.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?

12. Sunk Cost: Politically Protected Initiative

Setting

A senior sponsor wants to continue a failing initiative because the company has already invested heavily.

Speaker	Line
Sponsor	We have spent two years on this. We cannot stop now.
CFO	The economics have deteriorated.
ESL learner	The prior investment is real, but the decision should be based on future value, remaining cost, strategic fit, and alternatives. Continuing only because we already spent money would increase opportunity cost.
Sponsor	Stopping will look like failure.
ESL learner	We can position the recommendation as disciplined reallocation. The learning still has value, but the next dollar may create more value elsewhere.

Language notes

- Sunk-cost language needs tact because identity and politics are involved.
- Reallocation framing can protect dignity while changing course.

Role-play variation

Observer checklist

- Did the learner clarify the decision before expanding the analysis?
- Did the learner name a tradeoff, strategic choice, or resource implication?
- Did the learner connect evidence to value creation or value capture?
- Did the learner communicate uncertainty without hiding the recommendation?