EFSP Auxiliary ESL Curriculum

Corporate Strategy English

Instructor guide for high-level ESL learners working in corporate strategy, business strategy, transformation, corporate development, strategic finance, and executive advisory roles

Audience: instructors, corporate strategy English coaches, business-school-adjacent programs, corporate learning teams, and internal strategy trainers

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.

Purpose and Teaching Position

This EFSP curriculum is for high-level ESL learners working in corporate strategy environments: corporate strategy teams, CEO office, business strategy, corporate development, transformation, strategic finance, internal consulting, product strategy, commercial strategy, and leadership roles that require enterprise-level decisions.

The course is not an MBA survey. It trains professional English for strategy work: diagnosing ambiguous problems, framing choices, challenging assumptions, explaining tradeoffs, defending resource allocation, discussing uncertainty, and turning analysis into executive decisions.

Core language challenge

Corporate strategy teams compress high-stakes judgment into short phrases: where to play, how to win, tradeoff, activity system, profit pool, Five Forces, right to win, adjacency, horizon two, resource reallocation, NPV, ROIC, synergy, scenario, no-regrets move, trigger indicator, operating model, decision rights, and board narrative. Learners need the terms and the dialogue moves around them: clarify the decision, connect evidence to value, name uncertainty, and make choices visible.

Course objectives

- Use corporate strategy terminology accurately in executive discussions, strategy reviews, portfolio meetings, market-entry debates, M&A screening, scenario planning, transformation governance, and board preparation.
- Translate vague strategic goals into diagnosis, strategic choices, hypotheses, evidence requirements, tradeoffs, resource implications, risks, and decision rights.
- Discuss industry structure, competitive advantage, customer value, profit pools, business models, portfolio roles, resource allocation, strategic options, and execution governance in precise professional English.
- Push back on weak strategy: generic ambition, activity lists, spreadsheet-only business cases, pet projects, unsupported synergy claims, no-choice roadmaps, vanity KPIs, and politically protected investments.
- Participate in realistic strategy dialogues: CEO problem framing, where-to-play debate, Five Forces analysis, portfolio review, resource allocation, market entry, M&A synergy challenge, scenario planning, board-story revision, and KPI alignment.
- Write clear strategy outputs: issue trees, strategy memos, market-attractiveness summaries, investment theses, portfolio recommendations, scenario implications, executive decision notes, and board-ready storylines.

Corporate Strategy Communication Principles

Lead with the decision

Strategy work often produces large amounts of analysis, but executives need to know what choice is being proposed, what evidence supports it, what tradeoffs it implies, what resources must move, and what risks remain. Strong strategy English is decision-led, not data-dumped.

Make tradeoffs explicit

- Use 'the strategic choice is' when the team is confusing priority with preference.
- Use 'the tradeoff is' when leadership wants to pursue incompatible paths.
- Use 'the value pool is shifting' when revenue growth does not guarantee profit capture.
- Use 'the right to win is not yet clear' when a market looks attractive but the company lacks advantage.
- Use 'the next dollar' when challenging sunk-cost logic.

Turn vague strategy talk into executive questions

Vague strategy statement	Stronger executive question
We need a growth strategy.	Which growth source, with what right to win, economics, capability gap, and resource shift?
Let's enter the market.	Is the market attractive, can we capture value, and what route gives us speed, control, and acceptable risk?
This is a strategic acquisition.	What is the acquisition thesis, synergy source, integration risk, and alternative use of capital?
All initiatives are green.	Which strategic outcomes are improving, and which value drivers explain the result?

Nomenclature and Jargon

Teach these terms as working vocabulary. Learners should be able to define the term, use it in a realistic sentence, ask which evidence or definition applies, and explain the consequence for a decision. Strategy terms are often used loosely; the learner's job is to make them useful.

Strategy foundations

Term	Working meaning
Ambition	High-level performance or market position the company wants to achieve.
Diagnosis	Explanation of the strategic problem, its cause, and why it matters now.
Strategic choice	Decision about where to focus, how to win, what to build, and what not to do.
Tradeoff	A deliberate decision to deprioritize one attractive option to make another choice coherent.
Strategic thesis	Argument for why a course of action should create advantage or value.
Issue tree	Structured breakdown of a problem into analyzable questions.
North Star	Single guiding objective or metric that aligns strategic direction.
Activity system	Reinforcing set of activities that makes a strategy harder to copy.

Market and competitive analysis

Term	Working meaning
TAM	Total addressable market; full demand opportunity if all relevant customers were served.
SAM	Serviceable available market; portion the company can realistically reach with its offer and model.
SOM	Serviceable obtainable market; share the company can reasonably capture.
Profit pool	Where profit accumulates across segments, value chain positions, or business models.
Five Forces	Framework for industry structure: entrants, suppliers, buyers, substitutes, and rivalry.
Barrier to entry	Structural obstacle that limits new competitors.
Substitute	Different product or service that meets the same underlying need.
White space	Underserved market, customer need, or value-chain position where the company may compete.

Portfolio and resource allocation

Term	Working meaning
Core business	Current business central to revenue, profit, capabilities, or strategic identity.
Adjacency	Growth area near the core by customer, channel, capability, geography, or value chain.
Horizon one	Current core businesses that deliver most present profit and cash flow.
Horizon two	Emerging opportunities that may become significant future businesses.
Horizon three	Earlier options, pilots, or ventures that could create future growth.
Capital allocation	Decision process for assigning capital to businesses, initiatives, acquisitions, or returns.
Divestiture	Sale, exit, or separation of a business, asset, or product line.
Opportunity cost	Value sacrificed by keeping scarce resources in a lower-priority use.

Growth, M&A, and partnerships

Term	Working meaning
Organic growth	Growth generated from existing business activities, customers, products, or channels.
Inorganic growth	Growth through acquisition, merger, joint venture, or investment.
Market entry	Plan to enter a new geography, segment, category, or value-chain position.
Build-buy-partner	Comparison of internal development, acquisition, and partnership routes.
Right to play	Credible permission or relevance to compete in a market.
Right to win	Credible basis for outperforming alternatives in that market.
Synergy	Incremental value from combining businesses, assets, capabilities, customers, or costs.
PMI	Post-merger integration; work required to combine and realize value after a deal.

Value creation and financial logic

Term	Working meaning
ROIC	Return on invested capital; profit relative to capital invested in the business.
WACC	Weighted average cost of capital; benchmark return required by capital providers.
DCF	Discounted cash flow valuation based on expected future cash flows.
NPV	Net present value; value of future cash flows after discounting and subtracting investment.
EBITDA	Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization.
Margin expansion	Improvement in profitability as a share of revenue.
Sensitivity	Analysis showing how results change when key assumptions change.
Value driver	Factor that materially affects enterprise value, such as growth, margin, capital intensity, or risk.

Uncertainty and risk

Term	Working meaning
Scenario planning	Structured analysis of plausible futures and their implications for decisions.
Residual uncertainty	Uncertainty remaining after strong analysis has been completed.

Term	Working meaning
Trigger indicator	Signal that shows which scenario may be unfolding and when to revisit a decision.
No-regrets move	Action likely to create value across multiple plausible futures.
Strategic option	Limited investment that preserves future ability to scale, pivot, or exit.
Big bet	Large commitment that could create major upside or major loss depending on future conditions.
Risk appetite	Amount and type of risk leadership is willing to accept to pursue value.
Resilience	Ability of the strategy and organization to absorb shocks and keep creating value.

Execution and governance

Term	Working meaning
Operating model	How structure, roles, processes, governance, incentives, and capabilities support strategy.
Decision rights	Clarity on who recommends, decides, executes, and escalates.
OKR	Objectives and key results; goal-setting system linking outcomes to measurable progress.
KPI	Key performance indicator tied to a strategic objective or decision.
Roadmap	Sequenced plan of initiatives, milestones, dependencies, and owners.
Governance cadence	Regular rhythm for decision, review, escalation, and accountability.
Transformation office	Team coordinating large-scale strategic change and value delivery.
Board narrative	Concise strategy story for oversight, alignment, and decision-making.

Instructor Module Plans

Module 1. Strategy Role, Problem Framing, and Executive Diagnosis (90 minutes)

Corporate strategy work begins before analysis. Learners must frame the real decision, separate symptoms from causes, identify the executive audience, and define what would change if the analysis is persuasive.

Learning objectives

- Distinguish problem statement, symptom, root cause, hypothesis, issue tree, decision question, recommendation, and implementation implication.
- Ask executive-level clarification questions without sounding junior or obstructive.
- Write a concise diagnosis that names the strategic tension rather than listing every fact.

Core concepts

- Diagnosis: a disciplined explanation of what is happening, why it matters, and what tension the organization must resolve.
- Decision question: the specific choice leadership needs to make, not just the topic under discussion.
- Issue tree: structured breakdown of the problem into mutually useful questions that guide analysis.

Activities

1. Problem reframing: learners convert vague mandates into decision questions.
2. Issue-tree drill: learners build a strategy issue tree under time pressure.
3. Executive diagnosis practice: learners summarize a messy business situation in three sentences.

Learner outputs

- Problem statement and decision question.
- Issue tree with hypotheses.
- Executive diagnosis memo.

> **Facilitator note**
>
> When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 2. Strategic Choices: Ambition, Where to Play, How to Win, and Tradeoffs (90 minutes)

A strategy is not a slogan or a project list. It is a set of choices about where the company will compete, how it will win, what capabilities it needs, and what it will not do.

Learning objectives

- Use choice language for ambition, where to play, how to win, capabilities, systems, and management priorities.
- Explain tradeoffs without sounding negative or risk-averse.
- Identify whether an initiative supports the strategy or merely sounds attractive.

Core concepts

- Where to play: the customers, geographies, channels, segments, use cases, or parts of the value chain the company chooses to prioritize.
- How to win: the distinctive logic by which the company creates superior value or lower cost compared with alternatives.
- Tradeoff: a deliberate choice to deprioritize some opportunities so the chosen strategy can be coherent and resourced.

Activities

1. Choice cascade: learners test whether a proposed strategy makes real choices.
2. Tradeoff rehearsal: learners explain what the company should stop, delay, or reject.
3. Strategy vs slogan: learners classify statements as ambition, analysis, choice, initiative, or metric.

Learner outputs

- Strategy choice map.
- Tradeoff statement.
- Strategic coherence checklist.

> **Facilitator note**
>
> When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 3. Industry Structure, Competitive Dynamics, and Profit Pools (90 minutes)

Attractive growth is not always attractive profit. Learners need language for industry structure, Five Forces, profit pools, competitor moves, barriers, substitutes, and shifting value capture.

Learning objectives

- Discuss market attractiveness using Five Forces, profit-pool logic, growth, margin, cyclicality, regulation, and structural change.

- Explain why a growing market may still be strategically unattractive.
- Distinguish competitor activity from competitive advantage.

Core concepts

- Industry structure: the competitive forces that shape how value is created and captured in a market.
- Profit pool: where profit accumulates across the value chain, customer segments, geographies, or business models.
- Barrier to entry: structural factor that makes it difficult or costly for new competitors to enter and compete effectively.

Activities

1. Five Forces readout: learners assess an industry and identify the highest-pressure force.
2. Profit-pool map: learners locate where economics are strong and weak across a value chain.
3. Competitor move drill: learners separate noise from moves that change industry structure.

Learner outputs

- Industry-attractiveness summary.
- Profit-pool map narrative.
- Competitive implications memo.

Facilitator note

When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 4. Business Models, Unit Economics, Capabilities, and Advantage (90 minutes)

Corporate strategy must explain how value is created, captured, defended, and scaled. Learners need to connect customer value, economics, capabilities, activities, and operating model.

Learning objectives

- Use business-model and financial terms such as revenue model, gross margin, contribution margin, CAC, LTV, ROIC, WACC, DCF, NPV, and payback accurately.
- Explain strategic advantage in terms of activities, capabilities, cost position, differentiation, switching costs, data, distribution, brand, or scale.
- Challenge business cases that assume growth without credible economics or capabilities.

Core concepts

- Business model: how the company creates value for customers and captures economic value for itself.
- Unit economics: revenue, cost, margin, acquisition cost, retention, and payback at the customer, product, or transaction level.
- Capability system: reinforcing skills, processes, assets, data, culture, and operating routines that enable the strategy.

Activities

1. Unit-economics challenge: learners identify where a growth plan breaks economically.
2. Capability gap analysis: learners compare required capabilities with current reality.
3. Advantage explanation: learners explain why a competitor cannot easily copy a strategy.

Learner outputs

- Business-model narrative.
- Capability gap summary.
- Advantage thesis.

Facilitator note

When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 5. Portfolio Strategy, Capital Allocation, and Resource Reallocation (90 minutes)

Corporate strategy often fails because resources do not move. Learners need language for portfolio roles, capital allocation, mature cash businesses, growth bets, divestitures, adjacency, opportunity cost, and management politics.

Learning objectives

- Use portfolio terminology accurately: core, adjacency, horizon, business unit, capital allocation, resource reallocation, hurdle rate, divestiture, stranded cost, and opportunity cost.
- Discuss investment, hold, harvest, partner, acquire, divest, and exit recommendations.
- Push back when every business unit requests equal growth funding despite different economics and strategic roles.

Core concepts

- Portfolio role: the job a business or initiative plays in the enterprise, such as cash generation, growth option, strategic control point, or capability platform.
- Resource reallocation: shifting capital, talent, management attention, and operating expense toward higher-value strategic choices.
- Opportunity cost: value lost when scarce resources remain tied to lower-priority options.

Activities

1. Portfolio heat map: learners classify businesses by attractiveness, advantage, cash generation, and strategic fit.
2. Capital allocation role-play: learners defend a resource shift in front of business-unit leaders.
3. Divestiture language drill: learners explain exit logic without sounding dismissive of the team.

Learner outputs

- Portfolio recommendation.
- Resource reallocation script.
- Investment committee memo.

Facilitator note

When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 6. Growth Strategy, Market Entry, Partnerships, and M&A Logic (90 minutes)

Growth strategy requires a clear thesis: where growth will come from, why the company has a right to win, what route to market is credible, and whether to build, buy, partner, or wait.

Learning objectives

- Use terms such as organic growth, inorganic growth, adjacency, market entry, beachhead, build-buy-partner, joint venture, strategic alliance, acquisition thesis, synergy, integration risk, and cannibalization.
- Explain why a market may be attractive but still not a good fit.
- Challenge unsupported M&A or partnership logic with questions about value creation, integration, control, culture, and downside risk.

Core concepts

- Right to play: permission or relevance to compete in a market based on brand, access, capabilities, assets, or customer relationships.
- Right to win: credible basis for outperforming alternatives once in the market.
- Synergy: incremental value from combining assets, capabilities, customers, channels, cost structures, or technology, net of integration cost and risk.

Activities

1. Market-entry screen: learners evaluate attractiveness, fit, economics, and execution difficulty.
2. Build-buy-partner debate: learners compare routes to market under speed, control, risk, and capability constraints.
3. Synergy challenge: learners test whether projected synergies are real, timed, owned, and measurable.

Learner outputs

- Market-entry recommendation.
- Build-buy-partner comparison.
- M&A thesis and risk note.

Facilitator note

When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 7. Uncertainty, Scenarios, Strategic Options, and Risk Posture (90 minutes)

A strong strategist does not pretend the future is certain. Learners need language for scenarios, residual uncertainty, trigger indicators, no-regrets moves, options, big bets, shaping, adapting, and reserving the right to play.

Learning objectives

- Discuss uncertainty without sounding indecisive.
- Create scenario implications that change decisions, not decorative future stories.
- Recommend strategic moves based on uncertainty level, risk appetite, and trigger indicators.

Core concepts

- Residual uncertainty: uncertainty that remains after good analysis has been completed.
- No-regrets move: action likely to create value across multiple plausible futures.
- Strategic option: limited investment that preserves the ability to scale, pivot, or exit as uncertainty resolves.

Activities

1. Scenario cleanup: learners remove scenarios that do not change decisions.
2. Trigger indicator drill: learners define what the team should monitor and when to revisit the decision.
3. Options vs big bets: learners recommend the right move under different uncertainty conditions.

Learner outputs

- Scenario implications table.
- Trigger indicator dashboard.
- Risk posture recommendation.

Facilitator note

When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Module 8. Execution Governance, Operating Model, KPIs, and Board Narrative (90 minutes)

Strategy becomes real through operating model, decision rights, resource shifts, milestones, KPIs, governance, and narrative discipline. Learners must convert strategy into accountable execution without turning it into a long project inventory.

Learning objectives

- Use execution terms such as operating model, governance, decision rights, initiative, roadmap, milestone, dependency, OKR, KPI, leading indicator, lagging indicator, value driver, and board narrative.
- Separate strategic KPIs from activity metrics.
- Build an executive or board storyline that names choices, evidence, risk, resource implications, and decisions needed.

Core concepts

- Operating model: how structure, roles, processes, governance, capabilities, and incentives support the strategy.
- Decision rights: clarity on who recommends, decides, executes, and escalates.
- Board narrative: concise strategic story designed for oversight and decision, not a complete working file.

Activities

1. KPI cleanup: learners replace activity metrics with strategic value drivers.
2. Governance role-play: learners clarify owners, decision rights, and escalation paths.
3. Board deck rewrite: learners turn an analysis-heavy deck into a decision-ready storyline.

Learner outputs

- Strategic KPI set.
- Governance and decision-rights map.
- Board-ready executive summary.

Facilitator note

When learners give a generic strategy answer, ask: what is the decision, where will we play, how will we win, what tradeoff is required, what evidence supports the thesis, what resources must move, and what would cause us to change course?

Assessment and Coaching

Pre-course diagnostic

- Learner explains their strategy role in 90 seconds, including executive audience, planning cycle, analysis tools, decision forums, and hardest stakeholder conversations.
- Learner defines twelve strategy terms and uses six in realistic executive sentences.
- Learner handles a short role-play: a CEO asks for a growth strategy but refuses to make tradeoffs.

Performance rubric

Skill	Developing	Proficient	Strong
Terminology	Uses strategy terms as buzzwords.	Uses terms accurately and defines them in context.	Clarifies definitions, evidence, and implications for executive decisions.
Problem framing	Accepts vague mandates as given.	Turns ambiguity into decision questions and hypotheses.	Identifies the real strategic tension and what must change.

Skill	Developing	Proficient	Strong
Tradeoff discipline	Avoids conflict by supporting everything.	Names choices and resource implications.	Makes tradeoffs constructive, explicit, and tied to enterprise value.
Analytical judgment	Reports data without recommendation.	Connects analysis to value, risk, and options.	Challenges weak logic while preserving executive trust.
Executive communication	Presents too much detail or caveat.	Leads with recommendation and key evidence.	Builds decision-ready narratives for senior leaders and boards.

Capstone simulation

Learners lead a corporate strategy review. The company faces slowing core growth, a tempting adjacent market, an acquisition target with questionable synergies, pressure to give every business unit equal funding, and regulatory uncertainty. The learner must frame the strategic choice, assess industry attractiveness, challenge the business case, recommend resource shifts, define scenarios, and write a board-ready decision summary.

Source orientation for instructors

- Harvard Business School and Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness resources on Michael Porter's strategy, strategic positioning, tradeoffs, activity systems, and Five Forces.
- McKinsey three horizons framework for balancing current performance, emerging opportunities, and future growth options.
- McKinsey strategy-under-uncertainty materials for residual uncertainty, scenarios, trigger indicators, options, big bets, and no-regrets moves.
- McKinsey resource-allocation research for capital allocation, reallocation inertia, and linking resources to strategic goals.
- BCG growth-share matrix resources for portfolio management, relative market share, growth, investment, harvest, and divestiture language.
- SEC Management's Discussion and Analysis guidance for public-company discipline around management perspective, material information, known trends, uncertainty, and disclosure-oriented strategy language.
- The learner's own company strategy process, board calendar, investor materials, financial planning rules, governance model, and approved terminology.