ESL LAB

Business English Role Play Cards

Three situations your students meet at work: the job interview, the work email and the meeting. Each one has a worksheet that teaches the language, then two role plays with a secret goal on every card. The numbers match the blog post on esllaboratory.com.

LEVEL	STUDENTS	GROUPING	TIME
B1 to C1	Adults at work	Pairs, 1-to-1, self-study	15 to 30 minutes an activity

What's inside, in the order of the blog post

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How to run a role play

1. Two minutes, no script. Students read their card alone and underline one phrase. A written script turns speaking into reading.

2. Keep the cards secret. Each card holds half of the problem. The conversation is how they find the other half.

3. Notes now, feedback after. Write down what you hear. Stopping a negotiation for one article costs more than the mistake.

4. Report, then swap. Each pair says what they agreed. Then they swap cards and play it again.

For the teacher

> One-to-one: you take Role B, then swap. Students who are not working right now can play every role as written: the cards give all the details they need. Page 8 is yours: the hidden clash in each role play, a fair ending and the language to listen for.

SCENARIO 1 · ACTIVITY 1

Fix the Answer

B1-C1 · 15 min
The Job Interview

Interviewers don't want perfect English. They want an answer they remember. A strong answer tells one small story: the situation, what you did and what changed.

Weak answer, stronger answer

Read the weak answer. Rewrite it in two or three sentences with all three parts. Invent the details: a job, a year, a number. **In pairs:** one student asks the question, the other answers from the worksheet, then without it. **Alone:** record your answer and check the boxes below.

SITUATION
Where, when, what went wrong

+

ACTION
What you did, with I

+

RESULT
What changed, with a number if you can

QUESTION	WEAK ANSWER	MY STRONGER ANSWER
What are your strengths? EXAMPLE	*I'm a team player.*	I'm a team player. Last winter two colleagues left in our busiest month, so I trained the two new people myself, and we didn't miss one delivery.
Tell me about yourself.	*I'm 31, I like football and I've worked in many companies.*	
What is your biggest weakness?	*I'm a perfectionist. I work too hard.*	
Tell me about a problem at work and how you solved it.	*We had many problems. I solved them. I'm good with problems.*	
Why do you want this job?	*Because the salary is better.*	

☐ A real example ☐ A number or a result ☐ Under one minute ☐ Ends on why it matters for this job

BUYING TIME
That's a good question.
Let me think for a moment.
There are two things I'd say.

STRENGTHS
One thing I'm good at is ...
For example, last year I ...
As a result, ...

WEAKNESSES
Something I'm working on is ...
So now I ...
It's getting better: ...

SCENARIO 1 · ACTIVITY 2

Interview Role Plays

B1-C1 · 25 min
The Job Interview

Cut along the dashed lines. Give Role A to one student and Role B to the other. Read your card alone for two minutes and underline one phrase you will use. Don't show your card. **Alone:** read both cards, write the conversation in eight lines, then check that both people got something.

ROLE PLAY 1 The Gap Year

B1 · Pairs · 10 min

Candidate — ROLE A

You are applying to be office manager at a logistics company. You were an office assistant for four years. Last year you did not work: you looked after your father after an operation.

SECRET GOAL
Explain the gap in two sentences, then bring the talk back to your skills. Don't apologize for it.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› I took a year out to ...
› During that time, I organized ...
› What I'm looking for now is ...

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

Interviewer — ROLE B

You are hiring an office manager. Ask about the candidate's experience, the gap in their CV and why they want this job.

SECRET GOAL
The last two office managers left after a few months. You need a person who will stay for at least two years.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› Could you tell me about ...?
› I noticed a gap in your CV. Could you ...?
› Where do you see yourself in two years?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

ROLE PLAY 2 When Can You Start?

B2-C1 · Pairs · 15 min

Candidate — ROLE A

This is your final interview for a project coordinator job at a design studio. You want this job more than any other.

SECRET GOAL
Your contract says one month's notice, and you have another interview tomorrow. Agree a start date you can keep, and find out when they will decide.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› I'd be happy to, but my notice period is ...
› Would there be any flexibility on ...?
› Could you tell me when you expect to decide?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

Interviewer — ROLE B

This is the final round. Ask one question that starts with Tell me about a time when ..., then talk about the start date.

SECRET GOAL
A big client project starts in two weeks. You want the new coordinator by then, but you could accept a later start if they join two planning meetings before it.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› Tell me about a time when ...
› Ideally, we'd need you by ...
› What if you joined us for ...?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

SCENARIO 2 · ACTIVITY 3

Too Blunt

B1-B2 · 15 min
Work Emails

An email has four parts. Most problems are in the body: no reason, no deadline, or a tone that sounds angry in writing. Polite and direct can be the same email.

SUBJECT LINE	GREETING	BODY	CLOSING
What the email is about, in a few words	Dear Ms. Lee, / Hi Tom,	Why you are writing, then what you need, and by when	Looking forward to hearing from you.

Rewrite the line

Each line is clear but too blunt. Rewrite it so the reader still knows what you need, but wants to help. **In pairs:** swap worksheets and tick the rewrite you would answer first. **Alone:** read both versions out loud and keep the one you would send.

TOO BLUNT	WHAT I WOULD SEND
Hey, send me those files ASAP! EXAMPLE	Could you send me the files by the end of the day? Thank you!
Why didn't you answer my email?	
Meeting on Thursday canceled.	
I need the report. Today.	
Your price is too high.	

Write a better subject line

WEAK SUBJECT: "RE: QUESTION"
You need the agenda for Tuesday's meeting.

_____

WEAK SUBJECT: "HI"
You are sending your invoice for October.

_____

WEAK SUBJECT: "URGENT!!!"
The client's visit has moved from Monday to Wednesday.

_____

ASKING
Could you send me ... by ...?
Would it be possible to ...?
I'd appreciate it if ...

FOLLOWING UP
Just checking you saw ...
I'm following up on ...
Any update on ...?

BAD NEWS
Unfortunately, ...
I'm afraid we need to ...
Sorry for any inconvenience.

SCENARIO 2 · ACTIVITY 4

Email Role Plays

B1-B2 · 30 min
Work Emails

These role plays happen in writing. Role A writes the first email on a slip and passes it. Role B replies, then Role A answers once more on the back. Don't show your card. **Alone:** write all three emails, one from each side.

ROLE PLAY 3 Moving the Meeting

B1 · Pairs · 15 min

Account manager · writes first — ROLE A

You have a meeting with your client, Ms. Okafor, on Thursday at 10:00. This morning your manager asked you to fly to Madrid on Thursday.

SECRET GOAL
Move the meeting to next week and keep the client happy. Write the first email.

USEFUL PHRASES
› I'm afraid I need to reschedule ...
› Would ... work for you?
› I'm sorry for the short notice.

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

Client · replies — ROLE B

You are Ms. Okafor. You have a meeting with your account manager on Thursday. Read their email and reply.

SECRET GOAL
You present to your board next Monday, and you need their new prices before then. Next week is too late.

USEFUL PHRASES
› Thanks for letting me know.
› Unfortunately, ... is too late because ...
› Could we ... instead?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

ROLE PLAY 4 The Silent Supplier

B1-B2 · Pairs · 15 min

Office buyer · writes first — ROLE A

Eight days ago you emailed a supplier for a price for 200 office chairs. Nobody has replied.

SECRET GOAL
You need the price by Friday, or your manager will order from another company. Write a follow-up that is firm but friendly.

USEFUL PHRASES
› I'm following up on my email of ...
› Could you let me know by ...?
› If that isn't possible, ...

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

Supplier · replies — ROLE B

You sell office furniture. Read the buyer's email and reply.

SECRET GOAL
Their first email went to your spam folder. You have 120 chairs in stock; the other 80 arrive in three weeks.

USEFUL PHRASES
› Apologies for the delay. ...
› We can deliver ... now and the rest by ...
› Would a partial delivery work for you?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

EMAIL SLIP · FIRST EMAIL

To: _____

Subject: _____

EMAIL SLIP · REPLY

To: _____

Subject: _____

SCENARIO 3 · ACTIVITY 5

The Softening Ladder

B1-C1 · 15 min
Meetings

In a meeting, the same idea can close a door or open one. Soften the first sentence, then say clearly what you want. Too soft, and nobody knows you disagree.

Two steps up the ladder

Read the direct line. Write a softer version, then a diplomatic one. Diplomatic doesn't mean vague: the second sentence still says what you want. **In pairs:** say all three versions; your partner says which one they would use in their own meetings. **Alone:** say each version out loud and circle the one that sounds like you.

DIRECT	SOFTER	DIPLOMATIC ↑
That's wrong. EXAMPLE	I'm not sure that's right.	I see it a little differently. Could we look at the numbers again?
No, we can't do that by Friday.		
Your plan won't work.		
You're not listening to me.		
We already discussed this.		

DISAGREEING
I see it a little differently.
I take your point, but ...
I'm not sure that's right.

SAYING NO
I'd love to, but ...
What I could do is ...
That would be hard by ..., but ...

MOVING IT ON
Can we come back to ...?
So what we agree on is ...
What if we ...?

SCENARIO 3 · ACTIVITY 6

Meeting Role Plays

B1-C1 · 25 min
Meetings

Cut along the dashed lines. Give Role A to one student and Role B to the other. Read your card alone for two minutes and underline one phrase you will use. Don't show your card. **Alone:** read both cards, write the conversation in eight lines, then check that both people got something.

ROLE PLAY 5 One More Project?

B1-B2 · Pairs · 10 min

Team lead — ROLE A

It's the weekly team meeting. A new client, a bakery chain, wants a new website in three weeks.

SECRET GOAL
You want your best designer to lead it. Get a yes, or a plan you can live with.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› I'd like you to take the lead on ...
› How does that sound?
› What would you need to make it work?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

Designer — ROLE B

You are in the weekly team meeting. You already lead two projects, and one of them launches next week.

SECRET GOAL
Say no without saying the word no. Offer something else: a later start, a smaller part of the job, or help for a colleague who leads it.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› I'd love to, but at the moment ...
› What I could do is ...
› If we moved ..., I could ...

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

ROLE PLAY 6 The Launch Date

B2-C1 · Pairs · 15 min

Sales manager — ROLE A

You told a big client that the new app feature would be ready on 1 March. The client has already planned a campaign for that date.

SECRET GOAL
Keep 1 March. Losing this client would cost your team its target for the year.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› I take your point, but ...
› What would it take to ...?
› Could we agree on ...?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

Product lead — ROLE B

Your team says the full feature needs until mid-April. You are meeting the sales manager to agree what to tell the client.

SECRET GOAL
You won't release something broken. A simple first version could be ready on 1 March, if Sales tells the client what is not in it.

MY FIRST SENTENCE

USEFUL PHRASES
› I see it a little differently.
› The risk is that ...
› What if we ...?

DON'T SHOW THIS CARD TO YOUR PARTNER

TEACHER'S PAGE

Notes for the six role plays

Keep this page
Not for students

Every role play has a clash: each card holds half the problem. A fair ending gives each side something. Walk around, note the phrases you hear, and give feedback after, not during.

ROLE PLAY	THE CLASH	A FAIR ENDING	LISTEN FOR
1. The Gap Year B1 · Page 3	The candidate wants to move past the gap fast. The interviewer is really asking: will you leave too?	The candidate turns the year into skills (appointments, insurance paperwork, a budget) and says clearly why they want to stay.	Past simple for the gap, present perfect for experience: I've worked as ...; I'd like to ... for plans.
2. When Can You Start? B2-C1 · Page 3	Two weeks against a month's notice, and the candidate can't say yes on the spot.	A start in four weeks, two planning meetings before that, and a decision promised by a fixed day.	Narrative tenses in the Tell me about a time answer; hedging: Would there be any flexibility on ...?
3. Moving the Meeting B1 · Page 5	One person can't do Thursday, the other can't wait until next week.	A short video call on Wednesday or Friday, or the prices by email before Friday and the full meeting next week.	Present continuous for arrangements: I'm flying to Madrid on Thursday; Would ... work for you?
4. The Silent Supplier B1-B2 · Page 5	The buyer is annoyed and has a deadline. The supplier can only do part of the order.	A price today, 120 chairs now and 80 in three weeks, and maybe free delivery for the wait.	Past simple for what happened: I sent, it went; first conditional: If that isn't possible, ...
5. One More Project? B1-B2 · Page 7	The team lead needs a yes. The designer has no time and doesn't want to sound unhelpful.	A colleague leads the first week, and the designer takes over after their launch; or the client gets a four-week plan.	Saying no with an alternative: I'd love to, but ...; What I could do is ...; second conditional: If we moved ..., I could ...
6. The Launch Date B2-C1 · Page 7	A promise already made against a date nobody can meet. Both are right.	A simple first version on 1 March, the full feature in April, and one call to the client that both of them join.	Softened disagreement: I see it a little differently; I take your point, but ...; What if we ...?

Sample answers for the worksheets

Activity 1 · Tell me about yourself	I'm an office assistant with six years in logistics. In my last job I set up the booking system for 40 drivers, and now I'd like to run the whole office.
Activity 1 · Biggest weakness	I used to say yes to every request. Now I check my week before I agree, and I tell my manager early when something has to move.
Activity 3 · Why didn't you answer?	Just checking you saw my email from Monday. Could you let me know by Thursday?
Activity 3 · Subject lines	Agenda for Tuesday's meeting · Invoice for October · Client visit moved to Wednesday
Activity 5 · Your plan won't work	Softer: I'm not sure the plan works yet. Diplomatic: I like the idea, but I'm worried about the budget. Could we test it with one team first?
Activity 5 · We already discussed this	Softer: I think we covered this last week. Diplomatic: We agreed on this last week. Shall we keep that decision and move on to ...?

Any answer that keeps the meaning and sounds like the student is right. In Activity 5, check that the diplomatic line still says what the speaker wants.