

# Lesson Plan: Tactical Vagueness in Negotiation

*Modal distance and strategic hedging, for C1+ Business English students*

**Level:** C1-C2

**Time:** 50-60 minutes

**Focus:** Negotiation register, modals

**Best for:** Business English, executive negotiation prep

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## Learning objective

By the end of the lesson, students can use modal distancing and strategic hedging deliberately in negotiation contexts, preserving flexibility and rapport rather than defaulting to blunt, transactional directness.

### 1. Warmer (5 minutes)

Present two versions: *"We do not agree with this price."* and *"We might find it challenging to align on that specific figure at this stage."* Ask: which one keeps the negotiation open? Which one sounds more native? Discuss why direct, honest English isn't always the strongest move.

### 2. Presentation: modal distance (10 minutes)

Present a scale from blunt rejection to strategic openness:

- *Blunt:* "We don't agree." / "That's not acceptable."
- *Distanced:* "We might struggle to align on that." / "That could be difficult for us."
- *Strategically open:* "There might be some flexibility, depending on the overall package."

Emphasise: this isn't vagueness for its own sake, it's a deliberate choice to preserve options and avoid revealing a bottom line too early.

### 3. Controlled practice: soften the rejection (10 minutes)

Students rewrite each blunt statement using modal distance, without losing the underlying meaning. Answer key on the last page.

1. "We can't accept these delivery terms."
2. "That timeline doesn't work for us."
3. "Your proposal is too expensive."

### 4. Freer practice: the negotiation roleplay (15 minutes)

In pairs: negotiate a simple scenario (price, deadline, or contract terms) using only hedged, distanced language, no direct "yes," "no," or flat rejections allowed. Afterward, discuss: did the negotiation still move forward? Did anyone accidentally reveal too much?

### 5. Application: strategic ambiguity phrase bank (10 minutes)

Build a shared list of phrases that signal openness without committing:

- *"There might be some room to move on that."*
- *"We'd need to think carefully about that."*
- *"That's certainly something we could explore further."*
- *"It's not impossible, but it would depend on a few things."*

## 6. Wrap-up (5 minutes)

Discuss: this technique is specific to negotiation and similar high-stakes, adversarial contexts. Directness remains the right default almost everywhere else in professional English, the skill here is knowing when to deliberately switch registers.

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### Answer key (controlled practice, sample rewrites)

1. *"We might find those delivery terms difficult to work with."*
  2. *"That timeline could be challenging for us to meet."*
  3. *"We'd need to look again at the figures on this one."*
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