

Everyday Speaking Skills in English — Lesson 2

Hedging and Diplomatic Disagreement | B2 | Student Worksheet

Vocabulary

Each phrase is labelled by register: neutral (most professional contexts) or informal (casual conversation).

Hedging a claim

I don't doubt that..., but... [neutral]	Concedes the truth of something before introducing a significant qualification or concern.	<i>"I don't doubt that the technology works, but I'm sceptical about the cost of scaling it."</i>
There's certainly something in that, but I wonder whether... [neutral]	Acknowledges partial validity while raising a specific doubt about the broader claim.	<i>"There's certainly something in that, but I wonder whether it holds true outside this particular market."</i>
It's not as clear-cut as it might seem. [neutral]	Signals that an issue presented as simple actually involves real complexity.	<i>"The numbers look promising, but it's not as clear-cut as it might seem once you factor in seasonal variation."</i>
I'd hesitate to say... outright. [neutral]	Expresses reluctance to make a strong or absolute claim, even if you partly believe it.	<i>"I'd hesitate to say outright that the strategy failed — it's more that it underdelivered."</i>

Playing devil's advocate

Just to play devil's advocate for a moment... [neutral]	Signals that you are about to argue a position you may not personally hold, in order to test an idea.	<i>"Just to play devil's advocate for a moment, what happens if our biggest client leaves?"</i>
Let me push you on that for a second. [neutral]	Indicates you are about to challenge or probe someone's argument more directly, often in a constructive way.	<i>"Let me push you on that for a second — what evidence actually supports that conclusion?"</i>
Isn't there a risk that...? [neutral]	A diplomatic way of raising a concern by framing it as a question rather than a direct objection.	<i>"Isn't there a risk that we're solving the wrong problem here?"</i>
What would you say to someone who argued that...? [neutral]	Invites the other person to address a counter-argument without you having to claim it as your own view.	<i>"What would you say to someone who argued that this approach simply delays the inevitable?"</i>

Conceding gracefully

You've convinced me on that point, at least. [neutral]	Concedes a specific point clearly while implying the broader disagreement may remain unresolved.	<i>"You've convinced me on that point, at least — the timeline does need rethinking."</i>
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I'll grant you that. [neutral]	A concise, fairly formal way of conceding a specific point in an argument.	<i>"I'll grant you that the initial rollout was poorly communicated."</i>
That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it. [neutral]	An honest concession that acknowledges a weakness in your own position.	<i>"That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it right now."</i>
On reflection, I think you might be onto something. [neutral]	Signals a genuine, considered shift in your thinking rather than simple agreement.	<i>"On reflection, I think you might be onto something — I hadn't considered the regulatory angle."</i>

Exercise 1: Listening

Listen to Amara and Ben discussing a new project management tool. Then answer the questions — some ask about attitude and reasoning.

Conversation

Amara: So, the team's been using the new tool for three weeks now. What's your honest read on it?

Ben: I don't doubt that it's more powerful than what we had before, but I wonder whether we actually needed that much power.

Amara: Just to play devil's advocate for a moment — what if the complexity pays off once everyone's properly trained?

Ben: That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it. It's possible the learning curve is temporary.

Amara: Let me push you on that for a second. Isn't there a risk that we're just blaming the tool for what's actually a training problem?

Ben: There's certainly something in that, but I wonder whether the training problem exists because the tool itself is unintuitive in the first place.

Amara: Fair enough. What would you say to someone who argued the switch was rushed?

Ben: I'd hesitate to say outright that it was rushed — we did pilot it for a month. But on reflection, I think you might be onto something about the rollout. Communication was definitely weaker than it should have been.

Amara: You've convinced me on that point, at least. I'll grant you that the rollout could have gone more smoothly.

Ben: It's not as clear-cut as it might seem, though. Some of the resistance is just people disliking change, not a genuine flaw in the tool.

Amara: True. So where does that leave us — keep it, or go back to the old system?

Ben: I don't doubt that going back would feel easier in the short term, but I think that's the wrong instinct. We should give it another month before deciding anything.

Circle the correct answer.

1. What is Ben's initial assessment of the new tool?

a) He thinks it's worse than the old system in every way. b) He acknowledges it's more powerful but questions whether that power was necessary. c) He believes it has been a complete success with no issues. d) He refuses to give an opinion until more data is available.

2. Why does Amara play devil's advocate?

a) She secretly disagrees with Ben and wants to prove him wrong. b) She wants to test whether the complexity might be justified by future benefits. c) She has decided the tool should definitely be kept. d) She is trying to end the conversation quickly.

3. What does Ben suggest might actually be the real source of the problem?

a) The tool itself being unintuitive, rather than just a training issue. b) The team simply doesn't want to learn anything new. c) The company budget was too small for proper training. d) There is no real problem at all.

4. What does Ben concede about the rollout, even though he resists saying it was 'rushed'?

a) That the pilot period should have been cancelled entirely. b) That communication during the rollout was weaker than it should have been. c) That the tool should never have been purchased. d) That the whole team opposed the change from the start.

5. According to Ben, what complicates the idea that the tool itself is flawed?

a) Some resistance is simply people disliking change, not a genuine flaw. b) The tool has been proven completely free of any issues. c) Nobody on the team has actually tried using it properly. d) The company has already decided to abandon it.

6. What does Ben recommend at the end of the conversation?

a) Immediately reverting to the old system. b) Giving the new tool another month before deciding anything. c) Firing the team members who are resisting the change. d) Buying an entirely different tool instead.

Exercise 2: Multiple Choice

Choose the correct phrase. Options are often close in meaning — read carefully.

1. ____ that the proposal has merit, but I think the projected timeline is wildly optimistic.

a) I don't doubt b) Let me push you on c) I'll grant you d) Isn't there a risk

2. The data looks convincing on the surface, but ____ once you notice the sample size is far too small to draw firm conclusions.

a) I'll grant you that b) it's not as clear-cut as it might seem c) just to play devil's advocate d) you've convinced me on that point

3. ____, what happens if our main supplier suddenly raises their prices by thirty percent?

a) Just to play devil's advocate for a moment b) I'd hesitate to say outright c) On reflection d) That's a fair challenge

4. ____ we're underestimating how disruptive this change will be for long-serving staff?

a) Isn't there a risk that b) I'll grant you that c) You've convinced me on d) There's certainly something in that

5. The early results are encouraging, but ____ this approach failed completely — it's too soon to know either way.

a) I'd hesitate to say outright that b) Let me push you on c) I'll grant you d) Just to play devil's advocate

6. After hearing your explanation, ____ the original plan was flawed from the start.

a) on reflection, I think you might be onto something about how b) isn't there a risk that c) let me push you on whether d) what would you say to someone who argued

7. ____ for a second: what would you say to someone who argued we're simply avoiding a difficult decision?

a) Let me push you on that b) I don't doubt that c) It's not as clear-cut d) On reflection

8. ____ the rollout could have been smoother, but I still think the underlying decision was correct.

a) I'll grant you that b) Just to play devil's advocate c) Isn't there a risk that d) What would you say to someone who argued

Exercise 3: Matching

Match each phrase (A) to its function or meaning (B).

A - Phrase	B - Function / Meaning
1. I don't doubt that..., but... ____	2. Signals that an issue presented as simple actually involves real complexity
2. It's not as clear-cut as it might seem. ____	8. Signals a genuine, considered shift in your thinking rather than simple agreement
3. Just to play devil's advocate for a moment... ____	7. An honest concession that acknowledges a weakness in your own position
4. Isn't there a risk that...? ____	3. Signals you are about to argue a position you may not personally hold, to test an idea
5. You've convinced me on that point, at least. ____	1. Concedes the truth of something before introducing a significant qualification
6. I'll grant you that. ____	5. Concedes a specific point clearly while implying the broader disagreement may remain
7. That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it. ____	6. A concise, fairly formal way of conceding a specific point in an argument
8. On reflection, I think you might be onto something. ____	4. A diplomatic way of raising a concern by framing it as a question

Exercise 4: Gap Fill

Choose the correct phrase from the box.

Phrase Bank: I don't doubt that | It's not as clear-cut as it might seem | Just to play devil's advocate for a moment | Isn't there a risk that | I'd hesitate to say outright that | You've convinced me on that point, at least | I'll grant you | On reflection, I think you might be onto something

1. ____ the new system is faster, but I question whether speed was ever really the problem we needed to solve.
2. ____ — the headline figures look strong, but they don't account for the costs incurred during the transition period.
3. ____ , what's our contingency plan if the new vendor can't deliver on time?
4. ____ we're so focused on this one metric that we're missing other warning signs entirely?
5. ____ the campaign was a failure, since some of the long-term brand effects are genuinely hard to measure.
6. ____ — I still think the overall strategy is right, but the execution clearly needs work.

7. ____ that the original estimate was too optimistic, though I still believe the project is achievable on a longer timeline.

8. ____ about the pricing model — I hadn't considered how it would affect smaller customers.

Exercise 5: Choose the Right Phrase

Each question gives a sentence that is too blunt, evasive, sneaky, or otherwise unsuitable for a professional context. Choose the most appropriate rewrite.

1. Original: "You're definitely wrong about that and the data proves it completely."

Context: A colleague has cited a study that genuinely raises a fair concern, even though you disagree with their overall conclusion. This response is too absolute and dismissive.

Which rewrite is most appropriate?

a) I don't doubt that the study raises a fair point, but I think the overall conclusion goes too far. b) You're wrong, and the data proves it, completely and totally. c) I'll grant you that you're definitely wrong about everything. d) Isn't there a risk that the data proves you're wrong?

2. Original: "I secretly think you're wrong but I'll just ask a sneaky question to trick you."

Context: You want to challenge a colleague's argument constructively in a meeting, without it feeling like a personal attack.

Which rewrite is most appropriate?

a) I secretly disagree, so let me trick you with a question. b) Just to play devil's advocate for a moment, what happens if our key assumption turns out to be wrong? c) I'll grant you that I'm trying to trick you here. d) I don't doubt that I'm being sneaky right now.

3. Original: "Fine, you win, I admit total defeat in this argument completely."

Context: A colleague has made one genuinely good point during a longer debate, but the broader disagreement between you isn't fully resolved. Conceding total defeat overstates the situation.

Which rewrite is most appropriate?

a) Fine, total defeat, you win completely, I admit everything. b) I don't doubt that you've won this argument entirely. c) You've convinced me on that point, at least — though I still have reservations about the bigger picture. d) Isn't there a risk that you've won the whole argument?

4. Original: "Everything about this plan is obviously perfect with zero possible problems."

Context: You are reviewing a colleague's plan that has real strengths, but a specific assumption about market growth seems questionable. Calling it flawless avoids raising a legitimate concern.

Which rewrite is most appropriate?

a) Everything is perfect, honestly, with zero issues anywhere. b) Isn't there a risk that the growth assumption is too optimistic given current market conditions? c) I'll grant you that this plan has zero possible problems. d) I don't doubt that this plan is perfect in every way.

5. Original: "I have no answer to that and I refuse to think about it further."

Context: A colleague has raised a genuinely difficult objection to your proposal during a meeting. Refusing to engage looks evasive and unprofessional.

Which rewrite is most appropriate?

a) I refuse to think about that, I have no answer, end of discussion. b) That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it right now, but I'll look into it. c) Isn't there a risk that I have no answer to that? d) I don't doubt that I have no answer to that at all.

6. Original: "Your whole argument is basically simple and there's nothing more to say about it."

Context: A colleague has presented an argument that initially seems straightforward, but you believe it overlooks some real complexity worth raising.

Which rewrite is most appropriate?

a) Your argument is simple, basically, nothing more to discuss. b) It's not as clear-cut as it might seem — there are a few complications worth considering. c) I'll grant you that your argument is completely simple. d) Let me push you on how simple your argument actually is.

Exercise 6: Error Identification

Each sentence contains one error, or no error at all. Underline the error and write a correction, or write "No error".

1. I don't doubt that the plan works, but I question who it scales.

Correction / No error: _____

2. It's not as clear-cut than it might seem once you examine the data closely.

Correction / No error: _____

3. Just to play devil's advocate for a moment, what if our main client leaves?

Correction / No error: _____

4. Isn't there a risk for we're solving the wrong problem entirely?

Correction / No error: _____

5. I'd hesitate to say outright that the campaign failed completely.

Correction / No error: _____

6. You've convinced me in that point, at least.

Correction / No error: _____

7. On reflection, I think you might be onto something important.

Correction / No error: _____

8. That's a fair challenge, and I don't has a great answer to it.

Correction / No error: _____

Exercise 7: Complete the Dialogue

Choose the correct phrase from the box to complete each turn between Farid and Sana.

Phrase Bank: I don't doubt that | Just to play devil's advocate for a moment | There's certainly something in that, but I wonder whether | Isn't there a risk that | That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it | On reflection, I think you might be onto something | You've convinced me on that point, at least | I'll grant you

Farid: We're two weeks behind schedule. I think we need to push the deadline back by a month.

1. Sana: ____ the team is under real pressure, but a month feels like a big jump. Have we explored other options?

2. Farid: ____, what if we don't extend at all and just accept a lower-quality launch?

3. Sana: ____ it would work for a minor feature here, since this is core functionality and quality really matters.

4. Farid: ____ we're treating two weeks of delay as a crisis when it's actually a fairly normal part of a project this size?

5. Sana: _____. Most projects do slip somewhat. I suppose I am being a bit more anxious about this than the data probably justifies.

6. Farid: ____ about the anxiety — I think it's coming from how the last project went, not necessarily from this one.

7. Sana: ____, actually. The last project really did colour how I'm seeing this one.

8. Farid: ____ two weeks now, and we revisit the timeline properly next week with clearer data.

TEACHER ANSWER KEY

Do Not Distribute to Students

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Exercise 1: Listening

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2. Why does Amara play devil's advocate?

Answer: She wants to test whether the complexity might be justified by future benefits.

3. What does Ben suggest might actually be the real source of the problem?

Answer: The tool itself being unintuitive, rather than just a training issue.

4. What does Ben concede about the rollout, even though he resists saying it was 'rushed'?

Answer: That communication during the rollout was weaker than it should have been.

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Answer: Some resistance is simply people disliking change, not a genuine flaw.

6. What does Ben recommend at the end of the conversation?

Answer: Giving the new tool another month before deciding anything.

Exercise 2: Multiple Choice

1. ___ that the proposal has merit, but I think the projected timeline is wildly optimistic.

Answer: I don't doubt

2. The data looks convincing on the surface, but ___ once you notice the sample size is far too small to draw firm conclusions.

Answer: it's not as clear-cut as it might seem

3. ___, what happens if our main supplier suddenly raises their prices by thirty percent?

Answer: Just to play devil's advocate for a moment

4. ___ we're underestimating how disruptive this change will be for long-serving staff?

Answer: Isn't there a risk that

5. The early results are encouraging, but ___ this approach failed completely — it's too soon to know either way.

Answer: I'd hesitate to say outright that

6. After hearing your explanation, ___ the original plan was flawed from the start.

Answer: on reflection, I think you might be onto something about how

7. ___ for a second: what would you say to someone who argued we're simply avoiding a difficult decision?

Answer: Let me push you on that

8. ___ the rollout could have been smoother, but I still think the underlying decision was correct.

Answer: I'll grant you that

Exercise 3: Matching

1. I don't doubt that..., but... -> 1

Concedes the truth of something before introducing a significant qualification

2. It's not as clear-cut as it might seem. -> 2

Signals that an issue presented as simple actually involves real complexity

3. Just to play devil's advocate for a moment... -> 3

Signals you are about to argue a position you may not personally hold, to test an idea

4. Isn't there a risk that...? -> 4

A diplomatic way of raising a concern by framing it as a question

5. You've convinced me on that point, at least. -> 5

Concedes a specific point clearly while implying the broader disagreement may remain

6. I'll grant you that. -> 6

A concise, fairly formal way of conceding a specific point in an argument

7. That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it. -> 7

An honest concession that acknowledges a weakness in your own position

8. On reflection, I think you might be onto something. -> 8

Signals a genuine, considered shift in your thinking rather than simple agreement

Exercise 4: Gap Fill

1. ____ the new system is faster, but I question whether speed was ever really the problem we needed to solve.

Answer: I don't doubt that

2. ____ — the headline figures look strong, but they don't account for the costs incurred during the transition period.

Answer: It's not as clear-cut as it might seem

3. ____, what's our contingency plan if the new vendor can't deliver on time?

Answer: Just to play devil's advocate for a moment

4. ____ we're so focused on this one metric that we're missing other warning signs entirely?

Answer: Isn't there a risk that

5. ____ the campaign was a failure, since some of the long-term brand effects are genuinely hard to measure.

Answer: I'd hesitate to say outright that

6. ____ — I still think the overall strategy is right, but the execution clearly needs work.

Answer: You've convinced me on that point, at least

7. ____ that the original estimate was too optimistic, though I still believe the project is achievable on a longer timeline.

Answer: I'll grant you

8. ____ about the pricing model — I hadn't considered how it would affect smaller customers.

Answer: On reflection, I think you might be onto something

Exercise 5: Choose the Right Phrase

1. Original: "You're definitely wrong about that and the data proves it completely."

Answer: I don't doubt that the study raises a fair point, but I think the overall conclusion goes too far.

Why: This concedes the validity of the specific point raised while precisely targeting disagreement with the broader conclusion.

2. Original: "I secretly think you're wrong but I'll just ask a sneaky question to trick you."

Answer: Just to play devil's advocate for a moment, what happens if our key assumption turns out to be wrong?

Why: This signals constructive challenge transparently, framing it as testing an idea rather than a personal attack or hidden agenda.

3. Original: "Fine, you win, I admit total defeat in this argument completely."

Answer: You've convinced me on that point, at least — though I still have reservations about the bigger picture.

Why: This concedes the specific point honestly without overstating the scope of the concession — appropriately precise for an ongoing professional debate.

4. Original: "Everything about this plan is obviously perfect with zero possible problems."

Answer: Isn't there a risk that the growth assumption is too optimistic given current market conditions?

Why: This raises a specific, legitimate concern diplomatically, framed as a question rather than a flat objection.

5. Original: "I have no answer to that and I refuse to think about it further."

Answer: That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it right now, but I'll look into it.

Why: This honestly acknowledges the gap in your argument while remaining professionally engaged, rather than shutting down the conversation.

6. Original: "Your whole argument is basically simple and there's nothing more to say about it."

Answer: It's not as clear-cut as it might seem — there are a few complications worth considering.

Why: This diplomatically signals genuine complexity that the simple framing has missed, inviting further discussion rather than shutting it down.

Exercise 6: Error Identification

1. I don't doubt that the plan works, but I question who it scales.

Error: "who" -> "whether" | Wrong conjunction — the correct word here is whether, not who, since the sentence questions a possibility, not a person.

2. It's not as clear-cut than it might seem once you examine the data closely.

Error: "than" -> "as" | Comparative error — the fixed phrase is as clear-cut as, not as clear-cut than.

3. Just to play devil's advocate for a moment, what if our main client leaves?

Answer: No error.

4. Isn't there a risk for we're solving the wrong problem entirely?

Error: "for" -> "that" | Wrong conjunction — the fixed phrase is risk that, not risk for, when introducing a clause.

5. I'd hesitate to say outright that the campaign failed completely.

Answer: No error.

6. You've convinced me in that point, at least.

Error: "in" -> "on" | Preposition error — the correct collocation is convinced me on that point, not convinced me in that point.

7. On reflection, I think you might be onto something important.

Answer: No error.

8. That's a fair challenge, and I don't has a great answer to it.

Error: "has" -> "have" | Subject-verb agreement error — the subject is I, so the verb should be have, not has.

Exercise 7: Complete the Dialogue

Gap 1: I don't doubt that

Gap 2: Just to play devil's advocate for a moment

Gap 3: There's certainly something in that, but I wonder whether

Gap 4: Isn't there a risk that

Gap 5: That's a fair challenge, and I don't have a great answer to it

Gap 6: On reflection, I think you might be onto something

Gap 7: You've convinced me on that point, at least

Gap 8: I'll grant you