

Language focus: Narrative tenses (past simple, past continuous, past perfect) and “was/were about to”

Type of lesson: Test-Teach-Test and text-based presentation

Level: Upper intermediate

Duration: 1 hour

What's the aim of this lesson?

To develop students' ability to narrate a story using past simple, past continuous and past perfect and the structure “was/were about to”.

What do I need to know?

For this lesson you'll need to create two short stories about how two couples met. Ideally, you'll record the first story so that you can use it as a listening text. The second story is used as a reading text so doesn't need to be recorded. The stories don't need to be very long – 100-150 words for each is fine. There are more details about this in the “Listening for gist” and “Reading for gist” parts of the plan.

What do I need?

You'll need:

- some pictures of couples
- a recording of couple #1's first meeting – this recording should be the first half of the story only
- a handout of the gapped script from your recording of couple #1's story
- a handout of couple #2's story
- pieces of paper with verb forms written on them, in large print for sticking on the board

What do I do?

- Lead in

To set the context for the lesson, stick some pictures of couples on the wall. Ask students, in pairs, to look at the pictures and guess where they first met. You can include any couples you like here, depending on what's appropriate for your students and your teaching context. For example: Donald and Melania Trump, Han Solo and Princess Leia, Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street, Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce...

The important thing is to include the two couples who feature in the listening and reading scripts later on in the lesson. When I do this lesson, I use myself and my wife as the couple for the reading script. This adds an element of interest for the students, as well as surprise when they see the photo of us on the wall.

Conduct feedback as a class, accepting any and all reasonable and/or comedic suggestions of where the couples met.

- “TEST 1”

Next, it's time for the first “Test” of the Test-Teach-Test.

Give the students a few minutes to think of a first meeting story of their own. If you think this will be difficult for them, give them a few suggestions or prompts – the first time they met one of their teachers at school or their new boss; the story of their grandparents meeting, etc.

Divide the students into pairs and have them tell their first meeting story to each other. Monitor closely as they do this – your aim is to see if, and to what extent, they use the narrative tenses which are the linguistic focus of the lesson. If you like, you can ask a couple of students to tell you and the class their partner's first meeting

story. We'll be revisiting this activity in the second "Test" stage though, which is another opportunity to get feedback as a whole class.

- Listening for gist

Now it's time to focus on the couple who feature in your listening text. If you record this yourself, choosing a fictional couple (Homer and Marge Simpson, Bert and Ernie...) is easier, as it allows you to make up a story. Remember that whichever couple you record the story about, **the students need to have seen their picture and predicted how they met.**

Your story should include:

- some verbs in past simple (for the actual events in the story)
- some verbs in past perfect (for events before the story happened)
- some verbs in past continuous (for setting the scene)
- was/were about to (to describe a near future event in the story)

Here's an example of a story about Marge and Homer Simpson (inspired from [this page](#)):

I met Homer in 1974, while I was studying in my senior year at high school. I had been attending a feminist rally all day, but I climbed on top of one of the teacher's cars and broke the windscreen, and so I got a detention. Homer had been smoking in the toilets that day and he had a detention too. I was feeling tired and angry as I walked to the detention room. Just as I was about to turn around and run out of the school, I heard two boys laughing. They were walking towards the detention room. One of them was Homer. He had a huge smile and our eyes met...

Remind students of this couple and ask them to remember their ideas about how they met. Then play the recording to the class, asking them to listen and check if their predictions were correct. Depending on your story, you may need to pre-teach some vocabulary before they listen. **The recording should only tell the first half of the story** – your students will come up with the second half at the end of the lesson. Conduct feedback as a class.

- Reading for gist

Now highlight the second couple whose story you've chosen to use. Again, ask your students to remember their predictions, and then hand out your story and ask them to read and check if their predictions were correct. Conduct feedback as a class. This story should also include some examples of past simple, past perfect, past continuous and “about to”.

- Presentation (“TEACH”)

This is the start of the “Teach” part of the Test-Teach-Test.

Divide the students into pairs and ask them to underline all the verb forms from the reading text which help tell the story. While they're doing this, divide the board into four columns with the following headings:

- Describing events before the story happened
- Setting the scene for the main events in the story
- Describing the main events
- Describing a near future event in the story

Next, spread out on the floor the pieces of paper with each of the verbs from the story written on them. These are the same verbs that your students have just underlined. So for example, your pieces of paper might say:

- I walked in
 - I was about to go
 - I met
 - My boss was introducing
 - I was feeling
 - She'd been working
- ...and so on.

When the students have finished underlining the verb forms in the story, ask them to work collaboratively to stick the pieces of paper on the board in the correct columns (according to their function as narrative tenses). Conduct feedback on their collaborative work and highlight the form of the different tenses.

- Restricted practice

Now it's time to bring your students' attention back to the first couple. Hand out the script of the recording, with gaps for where the narrative verb forms go. In pairs or small groups, students complete the script with correct narrative tenses. Then play the recording once again so that they can check their answers. Here's the Homer and Marge example again, with gaps:

I _____ (meet) Homer in 1974, while I _____ (study) in my senior year at high school. I _____ (attend) a feminist rally all day, but I _____ (climb) on top of one of the teacher's cars and _____ (break) the windscreen, and so I _____ (get) a detention. Homer _____ (smoke) in the toilets that day and he _____ (have) a detention too. I _____ (feel) tired and angry as I _____ (walk) to the detention room. Just as I _____ (turn around) and run out of the school, I _____ (hear) two boys laughing. They _____ (walk) towards the

detention room. One of them was Homer. He _____ (have) a huge smile and our eyes _____ (meet).

- Less restricted practice

Your students are now going to continue this first story in any way they choose. Ask them to imagine they are Marge Simpson (or whoever you've used to tell the story) and give them a few minutes to think about how the story continues. They then take turns to tell their partner their version of the end of the story. To finish this stage of the lesson you can play them (or just tell them) the real ending of the story.

- Fluency practice (“TEST 2”)

Now it's time for the second “Test” stage of the Test-Teach-Test, using the same activity as in the lead-in.

Bring your students' attention back to the “first meeting” stories they thought of in the lead-in. In different pairs this time, have them re-tell their story to their partner. This time, of course, they should use some narrative tenses, and you can monitor, making note of good use of language and any recurring errors. Conduct feedback as a class, asking a few students to share their partner's story, then highlighting good use of language / recurring errors.