

Lesson Plan: Reported speech – when to backshift

Level: Advanced (C1–C2)

Time: 60–90 minutes

Grammar Focus: Backshifting vs. no backshifting in reported speech

Skills: Grammar accuracy, critical thinking, speaking, editing

Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Explain *why* backshifting occurs.
2. Identify situations where backshifting is **optional or unnecessary**.
3. Accurately choose between backshifted and non-backshifted forms.
4. Use reported speech naturally in academic, journalistic, and conversational contexts.

Materials

- Board / slides
- Handout with examples (or shared document)
- Short news-style text or quotes
- Optional: real headlines or interview excerpts

1. Warm-up (10 minutes): noticing the problem

Write on the board:

- A) She said she **was** tired.
- B) She said she **is** tired.

Ask students:

- Are both correct?
- What changes the choice?
- Does meaning change?

Students discuss in pairs, then share ideas.

Teacher note:

Elicit that grammar depends on **time reference, relevance now, and speaker attitude**, not just rules.

2. Review: What is backshifting? (10 minutes)

Brief recap (keep it fast—advanced students know this):

Basic rule:

When the reporting verb is in the past, the tense often moves one step back.

Direct Speech	Reported Speech
"I am tired."	She said she was tired.
"I have finished."	He said he had finished .
"I will call."	She said she would call .

Ask:

- Is backshifting always required?
- Let students say "no" before moving on.

3. Core focus: when we do NOT backshift (20 minutes)

Present and analyze **four key situations**.

1. When the information is still true

"Water boils at 100°C."
He said water **boils** at 100°C.

Usually occurs in...

Scientific facts, general truths, permanent situations.

→ Backshifting here can sound odd or misleading.

2. When the situation is still relevant or ongoing

"I live in Madrid."

She said she **lives** in Madrid.

(She still lives there.)

Compare with:

She said she **lived** in Madrid.

(implies possibly no longer true)

Key idea:

Grammar reflects the **speaker's interpretation**, not just time.

3. With recent reporting or "just said"

Common in:

- News reports
- Interviews
- Academic writing

The minister said the government **will** increase taxes.

Why no backshift?

- Reporting is immediate
- Information is forward-looking

4. When the speaker chooses not to distance themselves

Advanced nuance:

Backshifting can signal **distance, doubt, or neutrality**.

He said the plan **would** fail. (neutral / distanced)

He said the plan **will** fail. (speaker aligns with statement)

This is common in:

- Opinion writing

- Political speech
- Journalism

4. Controlled Practice (15 minutes)

Task 1: Choose & Justify

Students choose the best option **and explain why**.

1. She said she **(is / was)** allergic to nuts.
2. The professor said the exam **(is / was)** very difficult.
3. He said he **(will / would)** email us later.
4. The article said the economy **(is / was)** improving.

Emphasize:

Explanation matters more than the answer.

5. Advanced practice: meaning shift analysis (15 minutes)

Give pairs two versions:

- A) He said he **was** unhappy at work.
- B) He said he **is** unhappy at work.

Students discuss:

- What does each imply?
- Which would you use in:

A therapy context?

A news article?

A casual conversation?

This builds **pragmatic awareness**, not just grammar accuracy.

6. Production Task (15 minutes)

Option A: Journalist Role

Students write 5–6 reported statements from:

- A fake interview
- A press conference
- A documentary

Rules:

- At least **2 backshifted**
- At least **2 not backshifted**
- Be ready to justify choices

Option B: Speaking

Students retell a conversation they had recently, choosing when **not** to backshift.

7. Wrap-Up & Reflection (5 minutes)

Ask:

- When does backshifting change meaning?
- Is grammar always about "correct vs. incorrect"?

Final takeaway sentence for students:

Backshifting is a choice based on time, truth, relevance, and perspective — not just a mechanical rule.

Optional Homework

- Find a news article and highlight reported speech.
- Explain why the writer **did or did not** backshift each verb.