

Lesson Plan: Past simple vs. past continuous

Level: Intermediate (B1)

Time: 60–75 minutes

Objectives

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

- Distinguish between background actions and main events
- Use past simple and past continuous naturally in storytelling
- Correctly use when, while, as in past narratives

1. Warm-up & Lead-in (8 minutes)

Aim: Set narrative context

Activity: Picture Story

Show a picture of:

- A street scene
- An accident
- A busy café

Ask:

"What is happening in the picture?"

"What do you think happened before and after?"

Elicit:

"People were walking..."

"A car crashed..."

2. Guided Discovery: Meaning & Use (12 minutes)

Text (on board or handout)

Yesterday evening, I was walking home when I saw an accident. A woman was talking on her phone while a man was crossing the street. Suddenly, a car stopped.

Task

Students underline:

- Past simple
- Past continuous

Elicitation Questions

- Which actions describe the situation/background?
- Which actions move the story forward?
- Which action interrupts another?

Concept Check Questions (CCQs)

- Are background actions usually longer or shorter? (Longer)
- Are main events finished actions? (Yes)

3. Language Focus: Nuance & Contrast (10 minutes)

Board Summary

Past Simple	Past Continuous
Main events	Background actions
Completed actions	Temporary actions
Sequence of events	Actions happening at the same time
Often with when	Often with while / as

Contrast Examples

- I read a book when he called. (sequence)
- I was reading a book when he called. (interruption)
- She cooked while he was studying. (parallel actions)

Discuss meaning differences, not just correctness.

4. Controlled Practice (10 minutes)

Activity 1: Meaning Choice

Students choose the sentence with the intended meaning.

1. a) When I arrived, she cooked dinner.
b) When I arrived, she was cooking dinner.
2. a) They talked while the teacher explained.
b) They were talking while the teacher was explaining.

Discuss why one works better.

5. Semi-Controlled Practice: Sentence Expansion (10 minutes)

Activity 2

Give students simple sentences:

- I saw him.
- It started to rain.

Students expand them:

"I saw him while I was waiting for the bus."

"It started to rain while we were playing football."

Encourage variety and creativity.

6. Communicative Practice: Storytelling (15 minutes)

Activity 3: Interrupted Story

Students work in pairs or small groups.

Instructions:

- Student A starts a story using past continuous.
- Student B interrupts using past simple.
- Continue the story together.

Example:

- A: "I was walking through the park..."
- B: "when I heard a strange noise."

Focus on fluency over accuracy, then brief feedback.

7. Error Analysis & Feedback (8 minutes)

Write typical intermediate errors:

- When I was arrived...
- While I watched TV, he came.

Students correct them:

- When I arrived...
- While I was watching TV...

Discuss why they are incorrect.

8. Review & Reflection (5 minutes)

Ask students:

- When do we use past continuous instead of past simple?
- How does tense choice change the meaning of a story?

Homework (Optional)

- Write a short narrative (120–150 words) about:
 - An unexpected event
 - A memory from childhood
 - A problem that happened while you were doing something else

Must include:

- At least 5 past continuous
- At least 5 past simple