Topic: Talking about the past

Age: Teenage/adult

Level: B1

Timing: 90 mins

Aims:
- To help students talk about famous people using past tenses
- To develop students’ communication skills

Introduction
This lesson culminates in a short presentation about a famous person which the students will have worked on during the lesson, involving long group discussions as part of the process. Students will deliver the presentation in pairs, and both students should be encouraged to share the speaking.

The lesson requires the students to have studied, and understood (for the most part) the three presenting tenses, past simple, past continuous and past perfect. If you think your students need more language input on these tenses, this lesson might not be right for your course at the moment, but can instead be added to their schedule when they are ready for semi-controlled and free practice.

This lesson has few stages and is in theory relatively simple, but in practice requires a lot of attention and concentration on the part of the students. Be sure to provide help where called for.

Materials and Preparation
There’s a great deal of scope as to who students talk about in this lesson, and I wouldn’t want to restrict you, but essentially you will need a biography (one side of A4) of somebody famous which includes plenty of the tenses in question, with time references and a clear order of events. It may pay you to write your own, to be honest. I’ve included one of Michael Schumacher which has always worked well, but I’ve used many others which have worked equally well (depending on where I was working at the time).

You will also need photos of other famous people, up to a total of ten or twelve. It’s far better if they are people known to the class, to a greater or lesser degree.

(You might need some past tense grammar exercises depending on any consolidation needed.)
Procedure

Stage 1

Photo

I show the picture of Michael Schumacher first, hoping they will know him. Not many people fail to identify one of the greatest sportsmen ever however, and even so, previous knowledge of the celebrities is not essential to the first exercise, only really to sustain interest.

When they have said who he is, I ask them to tell me what they know about him, just to set the scene. Most of the information they are going to work with comes from the text they are about to receive. The group ‘chat’ just establishes the topic and generates some interest in what they’re going to be working with.

Stage 2

Biography

The text should not be too long, but should be informative, relatively speaking. Students need to work in pairs or small groups and read it, firstly for gist, but then for factual detail.

*Michael Schumacher* was born on **January 3rd, 1969**, in *Hürth Hermülheim, Germany*. He is a former *Formula One* driver, and a seven-time world champion. Many people say that in his heyday he was the greatest ever. **He was the first German to win the Formula One World championship.** In a 2006 survey, Michael Schumacher was voted the most popular driver among Formula One fans.

After winning two championships with *Benetton*, Schumacher moved to the *Ferrari* team in 1996, which had not won a drivers’ championship since 1979. While he was driving for Ferrari, during a period from 2000 to 2004 Schumacher won five consecutive driver’s titles with the team.

In August 1995, he married *Corinna Betsch*. They have two children, Gina-Maria who was born in 1997 and Mick, born in 1999. The family currently lives in *Gland, Switzerland* near Lake Geneva.

In 2010 Schumacher returned to the sport of Formula One with his new team, *Mercedes* but during that year did not regain the form that had seen him dominate the sport. Throughout the season driving for the German team, he has not made any impact on the higher reaches of the drivers’ table.
In 2005 Eurobusiness magazine said Schumacher was the world’s first billionaire sportsman. He donated $10 million for aid after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. His donation was bigger than that of any other sports person, most sports leagues, many worldwide corporations and even some countries.

adapted from www.wikipedia.org

The main task is to piece together the presenting events by identifying not only stated dates but also from understanding the grammar.

On doing this, students should draw some kind of time line which visually describes the events from that person’s life, in the correct order.

This is a version (incomplete) of what they might write for Michael Schumacher, and only one way of many.

As such, this is a lead-in to the later activities, albeit a lengthy one, and I use the time spent on these time lines to check that students are comfortable with the presenting grammar. I can usually tell this from their diagrams, but as I circulate my input acts both to check, and improve understanding. For this short period, I have no planned or prescribed way of doing it.

After each pair has finished, I ask them to sit with another group to compare their diagrams. It could be that they are in disagreement about something and this gives them an excellent opportunity to further revisit the grammar, again with my help and input. Note also that, considering this is primarily a speaking lesson, albeit incorporating other skills, the extra time spent discussing their work keeps vocal chords nicely tuned for the later activities.

(And it is at this stage that I would introduce the more traditional grammar exercises, but only where absolutely necessary. Gap fills and the like just don’t feel right part way through a lesson using realia and to move away from the stages of this lesson might make them more difficult to come back to.)

When it’s clear we’re on track with only perhaps minimal inaccuracies, it’s time to prepare for the presentations.
Stage 3

More photos

I now show photos of other famous people and for the first two ask the whole class what they know about each person before I hand them out and ask pairs to make conversation about each person. I specifically ask them to focus on this person’s past although at this point I don’t expect them to restrict themselves to the tenses that the lesson is focusing on. I pay attention to how much they seem to know. An encyclopaedic knowledge is not necessary, as too much information could in fact even hinder the later activities, but a basic awareness of what this person has done is a pre-requisite to it being of any use, so as I walk round and listen to the discussions, I make a mental note to exclude any of the photos that don’t seem to be engendering very much conversation.

After five or ten minutes of rotating the pictures and correcting any glaring errors, I take the pictures back and decide which ones can be taken forward to Stage 4.

Stage 4

More time lines

Stage 4 marks the first point at which students prepare their presentations for later. I give each pair one of the photographs and tell them that they need to use their knowledge of this person’s life to create a time line, very much like the one they created for Michael Schumacher, only this time without a text to work from. In essence, they are going to invent one.

I should make it clear, it is not important if the timelines are factually imperfect, but they should include a range of events which detail that person’s life from at least the beginning of their career to the present day. It doesn’t matter if it’s all wrong, provided it’s reasonable and contains a range of information. From experience, at least ten things.

As this is not an easy stage, my input is useful and I am happy to take a lead as I pass from pair to pair, making sure along the way that the time lines will be workable for the final stages.

When this has taken its course, maybe fifteen minutes later, it’s time for the final two stages.
Stage 5

Preparation

Each pair should hand its completed timeline to another pair, be this clockwise round the room, or a simple swap with the next two students.

On receiving the diagram the students will need to dissect the information and use it to prepare a short presentation about that person's life. And of course, as seen in the Schumacher text, they will need to include all three tenses in focus, past simple, past continuous and past perfect.

Working together on these presentations requires them to take notes, of course, but more importantly, to discuss the facts and in turn, the grammar they are going to use in the presentation.

It's a very free stage but takes up to half an hour to do effectively, even for a one or two minute presentation, so students can take advantage of it to extensively discuss matters and where done correctly this will involve a discussion not only of the material, but the grammar. As a teacher, my job is to make sure nothing erroneous goes onto the paper most of them will need in order to deliver a worthwhile presentation.

And as far as it goes, the presentation is almost superfluous, because the mainstay of their learning happens during the prep stage. But it can be fun, and as with so many TEFL lessons, without the focus of a final activity or a set of answers, the process runs the risk of becoming irrelevant itself.

Stage 6

Presenting

I may have pairs come to the front and present to everybody, or put them in fours and have them give their presentations in more comfort. However, as I said, the work has been done and barring misfortune along the way, the use and context of the three tenses will have become a lot clearer to everybody.

I correct any inaccuracies afterwards, inviting the class to suggest modifications, and I use this as a diagnostic should there be any need for further work on the target language in a later lesson.

If I need to (and sometimes even if I don't), I give them grammar exercises for homework, and at this point, let everybody go home.