



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

TOPICS

Ask an American: Commuting; start versus begin versus start off versus start on; a place to live versus a place to live in; might-have-been

GLOSSARY

congestion – heavy traffic; the presence of many cars on the road, making all cars go very slowly or even stop because there isn't enough room

* Congestion is worse than usual because there is roadwork on Main Street.

central – the center or middle part of something; downtown

* The Memorial Union is the central meeting point for university students on campus.

public transportation – shared transportation, like buses and subways

* Many employers help their employees pay for passes to use the public transportation.

to switch over to – to stop doing, using, or having one thing, so that one can do, use, or have some other thing

* We're going to switch over to another Internet service provider because it has lower monthly rates.

gradually – slowly; a little bit at a time; not all at once

* When Sheila first moved to Italy, she didn't understand anything anyone said, but gradually she started to learn the language.

rush hour – the period of time in the morning and again in the evening when there are many cars on the road because people tend to travel to and from work at the same time

* We try not to drive anywhere between 7:30 and 9:00 on a weekday because that's when rush hour is.

peak – the highest part of something; when something is at its maximum value

* Toy companies have peak sales in December, when many Americans buy holiday gifts for their children.

in excess – more than; greater than

* The fire caused damages in excess of \$400,000.



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

air pollution – chemicals that contaminate the air, making it dirty and unsafe to breathe

* When the air pollution is really bad, people are advised to stay indoors and not play or run outside.

fuel – coal, oil, or gasoline that is burned to produce heat or power

* As the cost of fuel rises, people tend to drive less.

emissions – gases that are produced and sent out from cars and trucks

* Car emissions can be deadly, so we should never run our car in the garage while the garage door is closed.

pollutant – something that causes pollution, making air, water, or land dirty and unhealthy

* Don't throw away old batteries! They're filled with dangerous pollutants.

air quality – a measure of how clean and pure the air is, and how safe it is to breathe

* Having certain plants in your home can improve the indoor air quality.

to start – to come into being; to take the first steps of an action; to begin

* When did you start to notice the pain in your knee?

to begin – to come into being; to take the first steps of an action; to start

* Our church began feeding the homeless in 1973.

to start off – to come into being; to take the first steps of an action; to start a long trip

* We'll start off our adventure tomorrow morning at sunrise.

to start on – to begin something that will take a good deal of time to finish; to begin to eat or drink something, or to use it up; to yell at or make angry comments about something

* We need to start on this painting project soon, before the rainy weather comes.

a place to live (in) – somewhere to stay; somewhere to make a home

* How long did it take you to find an affordable place to live in New York City?

might-have-been – an event that could have happened but never did; something that could have occurred, but didn't

* It's no use thinking a lot about the might-have-beens in our lives.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

“Park and Ride” and “Kiss and Ride” Facilities

When people live far away from bus stops and train and subway stations, they often need to use a car to get to their “stop” (where they can get on a bus, train, or subway train) so that they can use public transportation.

Public transportation systems “recognize” (see and understand) this, so they have created two types of “facilities” (places offering a particular service) to encourage people to use public transportation even if they have to use their car, too. The first type of facility is a “Park and Ride” facility. This is usually a “parking garage” (a large building with many floors where people can park their car) “adjacent” (next) to a stop for a bus, train, or subway. People can drive from their home to the Park and Ride facility and park their car there all day. If the Park and Ride facility charges for parking, the fee is usually much less than the cost of parking downtown, or other popular or crowded area in a city.

Public transportation systems also offer “Kiss and Ride” facilities. At these facilities, people can be “dropped off” (driven to a place by another person and then allowed to get out) at the bus stop or train or subway station, and then the driver continues on to go somewhere else, without parking the car. These are called Kiss and Ride because often a husband will drop off his wife and kiss her goodbye, or “vice versa” (the other way around, with the wife dropping off the husband).

Most public transportation systems combine Park and Ride facilities with Kiss and Ride facilities, so that people can choose whether they will be dropped off, or whether they will drive themselves to the facility and park there.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 276.

This is ESL Podcast's English Café episode 276. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Our website is eslpod.com. On it, you can visit our ESL Podcast Store, which has additional premium courses in business and daily English that you will enjoy. You can also download the Learning Guide for this episode; it contains lots of additional information, the complete transcript, vocabulary words, definitions, sample sentences, cultural notes, recipes for apple pie, the secret of life – all of those are found on the Learning Guide.

On this Café, we're going to have another one of our Ask an American segments, where we listen to other native speakers talking at a normal rate of speech – a normal speed. We're going to listen to them and explain what they're talking about. Today we're going to talk about “commuting,” driving between your home and where you work and then back again. And, as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

Our topic on this Café's Ask an American segment is “commuting,” driving from where you live to where you work, usually in the morning, and then driving back home again, typically in the afternoon. Americans living here in Los Angeles and in many other cities spend a lot of time commuting to and from work. Today's quotes are related to a study – a piece of research – done by the computer company IBM.

We're going to begin by listening to someone from IBM, Naveen Lamba. He's a researcher who worked on this study. The study looked at cities all over the world and which ones had the most problems with traffic – with too many cars on the road. It looked at which cities had the worst commutes; that is, the ones where it took the longest typically to get from your home to your office because of the traffic. The worst cities were Beijing in China and Mexico City in Mexico. Among the best cities was Stockholm, Sweden. So we're going to start by listening to Naveen talk about how Stockholm, Sweden is reducing the amount of time that people have to spend commuting. We'll listen first, as usual, then we'll go back and explain what he said. Naveen, I believe, speaks with a very common variation of English, with an accent often found in India. Let's listen:



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

[recording]

One example of what they've done is what they call a Congestion Management Program where everybody driving into the central city pays a congestion fee and the idea there is to discourage people from driving, but take public transportation instead. So what that program has done is the amount of traffic has gone down by about 20 to 25 percent. So, even more people switch over to public transportation.

[end of recording]

Naveen begins by telling us what the people in Stockholm have done to improve their commuting situation. He says, "One example of what they have done is what they call (the Swedes call) a Congestion Management Program." The word "congestion" means lots of traffic, where there are a lot of cars on the road and all the cars are moving very slowly. Sometimes you are stopped, sometimes you are going at a very slow speed. We would call that "congestion" – that situation. In Stockholm, there's a program to deal with, or help, solve this problem, and it's called the Congestion Management Program. Naveen says that everyone driving in the central city pays a congestion fee. The "central" part of something is always the center – the main part. We would more commonly say the downtown area – the main business district. So, in Stockholm if you drive in the main business district – the central part of the city – you have to pay extra, a congestion fee. "Fee" is an amount of money you have to pay typically to the government to do something. This program – or this kind of program has become popular in other cities as well. I know London, England, for example, has a similar program.

Naveen says that the idea behind this program – the reason for this program – is to discourage people from driving but take public transportation instead. "To discourage" someone means to try to get them not to do something, to give them information that would make them not want to do a certain thing. I discourage you from trying to memorize vocabulary; instead, I encourage you (the opposite of "discourage" is "encourage") to read as much as you can – and, of course, listen to ESL Podcast! Instead of taking your own car in Stockholm, they're trying to encourage you to take "public transportation," things like buses and subways.

Naveen says that this program has reduced, or decreased, the amount of traffic by 20 to 25 percent. He says traffic has "gone down," meaning decreased, by about 20 to 25 percent. He finishes by saying, "So, even more people switch over to public transportation." "To switch (switch) over" is a two-word phrasal



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

verb meaning to stop doing something and do something else instead. If you normally drink a lot of coffee, as I used to when I was younger, but then have decided that you want to have less caffeine, you might switch over to tea. Personally, I switched over to tea not because of the caffeine, but because the coffee started to bother my stomach. So now I drink tea. I actually wish I had more caffeine; I want more caffeine in my drink. Maybe I need to get some caffeine tablets, something I could put in the water that would give me even more caffeine. More caffeine, that's what I need! Did I mention caffeine? I really need a lot of caffeine!

We're talking about public transportation, and Naveen mentions how people are switching over from their cars to public transportation. This, of course, would help decrease congestion. Let's listen to Naveen talk about this one more time.

[recording]

One example of what they've done is what they call a Congestion Management Program where everybody driving into the central city pays a congestion fee and the idea there is to discourage people from driving, but take public transportation instead. So what that program has done is the amount of traffic has gone down by about 20 to 25 percent. So, even more people switch over to public transportation.

[end of recording]

I mentioned that Stockholm, Sweden was the best city that IBM studied when it came to traffic and congestion. However, in the U.S. there were also some cities that did well – that were considered good for commuters, people who commute, and the U.S. city that did the best was Houston, Texas. Texas is a large state located in south central part of the United States; it is just north of Mexico. Houston is a large town in Texas, one of the two largest cities, the other being Dallas. Houston is located near the ocean in the southeast part of the state of Texas.

One of the people who works in the Houston area, someone who is responsible for transportation planning, is Alan Clark. Clark says that he's happy that Houston was rated highly – was considered one of the best large cities for commuting, but he says there's still a lot of work left to be done. That is, they have more work to do to make the situation even better. Let's listen to him talk about the situation in Houston.



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

[recording]

For example, the number of hours that we consider to be congested have grown gradually over time. Now we have what we would call rush hour conditions or peak travel conditions for as much as eight hours during the day – about three to four hours in the morning and a similar time period in the evening.

[end of recording]

Alan is talking about some of the problems with commuting that still exist in Houston. He says, “For example, the number of hours that we consider to be congested have grown gradually over time.” If something happens or grows or increases “gradually” (gradually) we mean it happens slowly, a little bit at a time, not all at once, bit by bit. It slowly increases, or it could be slowly decreasing. You could say, “I’m gradually improving my vocabulary in English.” It isn’t improving every day by 100 percent, but it is improving slowly over time.

So in Houston, the number of hours of the day that they consider the traffic to be congested has grown over time, meaning over many years. “Now,” he says, “we have what we would call rush hour conditions or peak travel conditions for as much as eight hours during the day.” “Rush hour” comes from the verb “to rush” (rush), which means to hurry, to go quickly. We use the phrase “rush hour” however to talk about the period of time in the morning and again in the evening where there are many cars on the road – many cars traveling – since people usually go to work and return home at about the same time – at about the same hour. Even though “rush,” or “to rush” means to go quickly, in rush hour traffic usually goes very slowly. There isn’t a lot of rushing in rush hour because the roads are congested. Rush Hour was also the name of a movie with the actor Jackie Chan – which has nothing to do with this Café!

Another term – another phrase we can use to describe rush hour is “peak travel time.” A “peak” (peak) is normally the highest part of something. We can talk about the peak of a mountain. In Colorado there’s a famous location called Pikes Peak; it’s a peak, a top of a mountain that is named after one of the explorers. I believe his name was Pike. So, Pikes Peak is an example of the highest part of something. Peak travel, then, refers to the time when there are a large number of cars on the road, and that, of course, is the same as rush hour most days. Alan says that Houston’s rush hour or peak travel times can now last for as much as eight hours during the day. “For as much as” means it can be up to that amount, usually not more, often it’s less. But, if it can be as much as, that’s sort



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

of the maximum that it can be. This rush hour is three or four hours in the morning, and three or four hours in the afternoon.

Let's listen again to why Houston's got a problem.

[recording]

For example, the number of hours that we consider to be congested have grown gradually over time. Now we have what we would call rush hour conditions or peak travel conditions for as much as eight hours during the day – about three to four hours in the morning and a similar time period in the evening.

[end of recording]

Finally we're going to hear Mr. Clark talk about why all of this congestion is such a big problem for cities. Let's listen.

[recording]

It's estimated that the average commuter in our region, congestion costs that person in excess of 1,000 dollars per year in lost time. Now, it also adds to our problems of air pollution. The time that we spend in congested conditions significantly adds to the amount of fuel cars and trucks are burning. And that in turn leads to additional emissions of harmful pollutants and our area is very concerned about improving air quality as one of the key ways to make our communities even better places to live and work.

[end of recording]

Clark begins by saying, "It's estimated that the average commuter in our region (in our area), congestion costs that person in excess of 1,000 dollars per year in lost time." So he "estimates," he guesses or calculates that the typical commuter in the Houston area has congestion costs in excess of 1,000 dollars per year. When you have an "excess" (excess) you have too much of something. The expression "in excess of" means more than, so it costs the average person more than 1,000 dollars per year in lost time, meaning if they had been working during that time they would have made an additional 1,000 dollars.

He says the congestion "also adds to our problems of air pollution," where the environment becomes dirty – where the environment is harmed. Air pollution is a big problem here in Los Angeles, and in many large cities. Alan says that the



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

time we spend in congested conditions (sitting in our cars) significantly adds to the amount of “fuel” (gasoline) that cars and trucks are burning (or using). When cars and trucks are operating – are running – they’re burning fuel, and this gasoline that burns in the engine leads to additional emissions of harmful pollutants. That’s what Alan says. “Emissions” comes from the word “to emit” (emit), meaning to produce, to send out. Cars emit carbon monoxide and other gases; we can call those gases “emissions.” Most of the emissions from cars and trucks that we worry about are harmful – they’re dangerous pollutants. A “pollutant” is something that causes pollution; in this case, air pollution. It makes the air dirty and unhealthy.

Alan says, “our area (Houston) is very concerned (very worried) about improving air quality (making the air cleaner, in this case).” Improving air quality is one of the key, or most important ways to make our communities even better places to live and work. If we would improve this air quality our communities would be better. Now let’s listen one more time to Alan.

[recording]

It’s estimated that the average commuter in our region, congestion costs that person in excess of 1,000 dollars per year in lost time. Now, it also adds to our problems of air pollution. The time that we spend in congested conditions significantly adds to the amount of fuel cars and trucks are burning. And that in turn leads to additional emissions of harmful pollutants and our area is very concerned about improving air quality as one of the key ways to make our communities even better places to live and work.

[end of recording]

I love the beautiful city of Los Angeles, but we have lots of problems with traffic and congestion. Let’s hope that Los Angeles and other cities can find ways to make our commutes shorter by decreasing congestion.

Now let’s answer a few of your questions.

Our first question comes from Le Hoang (Le Hoang). I’m not sure where Le Hoang is from; I’m going to guess Vietnam. The question has to do with the difference between “start” and “begin,” especially phrasal verbs like “start off” and “start on.”



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

Let's begin with "start" and "begin," they're simple definitions. "To start" or "to begin" both mean to take the first steps of an action, to do the first thing that you need to do to complete whatever you are trying to do. So we might say, "Sam started to work on his science project." We could also say, "Sam began (past tense of begin) to work on his science project."

There are some additional phrasal verbs, especially with the verb "to start" that you might hear. The first one is "start off." "Start off" means the same as "start," but it's often used when you are at the beginning of a long trip – a long journey, or you have several things to do and you are giving the people listening to you the idea that it's going to take a long time to finish what you are doing. So, someone could start off a meeting by announcing that the company has been losing money this year. The idea was that they would have a lot more to say in the meeting; that's just the first thing that was said. Or, you could say, "We're going to start off for San Francisco tomorrow morning at six o'clock." We are going to begin our trip at that time.

"To start on (something)" means also to begin to do something that is going to take a long time, often related to some sort of food or something that you drink. "We're going to start on this bottle of wine." We're going to start drinking it. You could also say, "to start in on." That's confusing, I know. "To start in on (something)" means the same as "to start on (something)." "To start in on" usually means to do it right away, immediately, perhaps with some enthusiasm or urgency.

"Start on" can also mean something very different; it can mean to yell at, to shout at someone, to make angry comments about them very loudly. "Bill's mom was yelling at his sister, and then she started on him." She started yelling at him. "To start off on" – notice, it's a combination almost: "to start off on" – means to help someone else begin an activity or a project. "The teacher started the whole class off on a worksheet," a piece of paper that she wanted them to work on. I'm going to start you off on this task, and then after I have helped you then you will be able to continue it by yourself. That's the idea.

Interestingly enough "to start off on" can also mean to yell at someone, so can "to start in on." There's a lot of ways of saying that, when someone starts getting angry and yelling at another person. We often use the expression "to go off on." "She went off on her boyfriend for being late the third time this week." My advice: get a new boyfriend!



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 276

Our next question comes from JC, I have no idea where JC is from – we'll just say he's from Pluto! JC from Pluto wants to know the difference between the expression "a place to live" and "a place to live in." Both of these phrases refer to a place where you are going to stay, usually sleep, a place that you are going to make your home. "I need to find a place to live when I begin studying at the university." I'm moving from a different city, so I'll have to find a place to live. You could also say, "I have to find a place to live in before I begin my classes." "A place to live in" is not as common as someone saying, "I need to find a place to live." When you use the preposition "in," in this case, you're probably referring to a specific kind of place: "I live in a house," "the rabbits live in their cages." The preposition "in" can come after "live" when you are talking about the city or state or country as well: "I live in Los Angeles; my brother lives in Minneapolis," and so forth.

Finally, Mateus (Mateus) from Brazil – not Pluto – wants to know the meaning of a phrase he heard: "might have been." If you're using it as a verb phrase you're talking about the possibility of something in the past. "It might have been cold last night. I don't know, I was inside of my house the whole time," but it might have been cold; it's possible.

"Might-have-been," when you put a hyphen in between the words, can also be used as a noun to refer to something that never happened; it was never true but it could have happened; it would have been possible but it didn't actually happen. "If John F. Kennedy had lived past 1963 we don't know what America would have been like in the 1960s. It is one of the great might-have-beens of American history." When used this way as a noun, it's almost always about a good thing – a positive thing. We wouldn't use it to talk about a bad thing, only a positive event that was possible.

If you've started in on a good book and find a phrase or word that you don't understand you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. We'll try to answer your question on a future English Café.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us next time on the English Café.

ESL Podcast's English Café is written and produced by Dr. Jeff McQuillan and Dr. Lucy Tse, copyright 2011 by the Center for Educational Development.