



ESL Podcast 287 – A Traffic Jam

GLOSSARY

traffic jam – when there are so many cars on a road that they move very slowly, or cannot move at all

* There are traffic jams every morning on many of the freeways in Los Angeles.

congested – with many cars that are moving very slowly, without very much room between cars

* Main Street is congested at this time of day. Let's drive on a different road.

bridge – a part of a road that is built over water or another road so that cars or people can cross over

* The city of Eugene is building a new bridge over the Willamette River.

to have no choice but to... – to be forced to do something; to have no other option but...; to have no choice to do anything except...

* We were lost in the forest, very hungry and tired, but we had no choice but to continue walking to try to get home.

bumper-to-bumper – with very little space between cars, so that their “bumpers” (the long pieces of metal on the front and back of a car) are almost touching

* When I'm driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic, I have to pay attention because if the car in front of me stops suddenly, I'll have to stop very quickly, too.

shoulder – the side of a road, where cars should not drive; the side of the road, where cars can stop if there is an emergency

* Too many people throw their garbage onto the road's shoulder.

backup – the area where cars are moving slowly or not at all because there is too much traffic

* We heard on the radio that there's a big backup on the freeway, so we're going to wait a few hours before starting to drive home.

to bypass – to go around something

* You can bypass the construction if you drive down Lincoln Street.

stalled car – a car that has stopped working while it is on the road

* The other cars are honking because there's a stalled car in the intersection and it's blocking traffic.



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rubbernecker – a person who slows down his or her car to look out the window and see an accident, making the cars behind it slow down

* Let's not be rubberneckerers! When we pass that accident, let's look straight ahead and continue driving at a normal speed.

road construction – the process of fixing a road, usually requiring that all or part of the road be closed temporarily

* There's a lot of road construction on Highway 58, because the government is making it wider.

lane – the space between painted lines on the road that is meant for one line of cars

* Slower cars should be in the right-hand lane, and faster cars should be in the left-hand lane.

stop-and-go traffic – cars that move a short distance, then stop, then move another short distance, then stop, and so on

* In the stop-and-go traffic, it took me 50 minutes to get home, when it usually takes only 15 minutes.

at my wit's end – very frustrated; desperate; feeling like one will go crazy

* After spending more than eight hours in a classroom with 30 noisy six-year-olds, I was at my wit's end!

recklessly – not carefully; without being cautious; dangerously

* Timothy was in a car accident because he was driving recklessly.

to make up for lost time – to do something quickly because one was delayed and wasn't able to do it earlier

* The team had to work on some other things last week, so now it's making up for lost time, staying at the office very late to finish the project.

to stand (someone) up – to not meet someone when one is supposed to, especially if the two people arranged a romantic date

* Tanya waited at the restaurant for 30 minutes before she realized that Dorian had stood her up.



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was there a traffic jam?
 - a) Because the bypass was closed.
 - b) Because people were fixing the road.
 - c) Because the rubberneckers had an accident.

2. Why was the man in the story at his wit's end?
 - a) Because he was frustrated about the slow traffic.
 - b) Because he was at the end of Wit Road.
 - c) Because he wanted to take the bridge downtown.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

bridge

The word “bridge,” in this podcast, means a part of a road that is built so that cars or people can cross over water or another road: “Everyone has to cross a bridge to get into Manhattan.” “Bridge” is also a card game: “Do you want to come over for a game of bridge tonight?” Another meaning of “bridge” is something that connects two things: “Junior high school is a bridge between elementary school and high school.” As a verb, “to bridge” means to build a bridge: “Let’s use this log to bridge the stream.” The phrase “to bridge the gap between (something or someone)” means to make the difference between two things or people become smaller: “The Internet is bridging the gap between people who traditionally had access to information and those who didn’t.”

shoulder

In this podcast, the word “shoulder” means the side of a road, where cars shouldn’t drive: “When there isn’t a bicycle lane, cyclists usually ride on the shoulder.” A “shoulder” is also the part of one’s body at the top of one’s arm and next to one’s neck: “Casey is carrying a heavy backpack on his shoulders.” As a verb, “to shoulder (something)” means to accept doing something even though it’s difficult: “When her Mom died, Beth shouldered the responsibility of taking care of her younger brothers and sisters.” Sometimes people offer a friend “a shoulder to cry on,” meaning that he or she feels sympathetic toward another person and is willing to listen to him or her talk about a problem.



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CULTURE NOTE

Large U.S. cities have many traffic jams, especially during “rush hour,” when there are more cars than usual on the road because people are driving to and from work. Some cities are trying to “address” (find solutions for) these problems by building more and bigger roads, but this is expensive. Other cities are trying to “reduce” (decrease) traffic by using toll roads, carpool lanes, and/or mass transit.

“Toll roads” are roads where drivers must pay a “toll” (an amount of money paid to do something) to drive on them. These tolls may be a few dollars, so poorer drivers often decide to use a different road. This means that there are fewer cars on the toll roads, and therefore fewer traffic jams.

Some cities want people to “carpool,” or share their cars with other people who are going to the same place. In these cities, people who carpool by having a certain number of people in their car are allowed to use “carpool lanes.” Because few people carpool, the carpool lanes have fewer cars than the regular lanes do, so there are fewer traffic jams and these people can drive more quickly. Cars that use the carpool lanes without having enough people in the car can be stopped by the police and forced to pay a “fine” (an amount of money paid as a punishment).

Finally, other cities are trying to improve their “mass transit” systems of busses, trains, and subways that move people around a city. Most U.S. cities do not have good mass transit systems. People have to wait a long time for busses, and busses go to only a few places in a city. But cities are trying to find the money to make their mass transit systems better.

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – b; 2 – a



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 287: A Traffic Jam.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 287. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Remember to visit our website at eslpod.com to download a Learning Guide for this episode.

This episode is called “A Traffic Jam.” It’s a story about someone who gets on the road to drive, and finds that there are many other cars there that are slowing traffic down. Let’s get started.

[start of story]

I was on my way to a restaurant to meet my date for dinner when I hit a traffic jam. I saw that the road was congested, but since I had to take the bridge to reach downtown, I had no choice but to stay on that road.

The traffic was bumper-to-bumper. One crazy driver even tried to drive on the shoulder to get around the backup. But as it turns out, there wasn’t any way to bypass it because the backup wasn’t due to an accident, a stalled car or some rubberneckers. It was because of road construction and only one lane was open.

After 25 minutes of stop-and-go traffic, I was at my wit’s end. My date was sitting at the restaurant waiting for me and I didn’t have her cell phone number. What’s more, I was really hungry.

Finally, I got past the road construction and was on my way again. I drove a little recklessly, but I had to make up for lost time. I really liked this girl. The last thing I wanted was to make her think that I stood her up!

[end of story]

Our story is called “A Traffic Jam” (jam). A “traffic jam” is when you have too many cars on a road, and that causes them to move very slowly or not move at all. So, if you have too much traffic – too many cars – you have a “traffic jam.” Here in Los Angeles, we have lots of traffic jams almost every day.



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This person is going to a restaurant, in our story, to meet his date for dinner, and he hits a traffic jam. Notice the verb “to hit” is used with this expression. “I hit a traffic jam,” that means I was driving, and then suddenly, the traffic – the cars – started moving slowly – I was in a “traffic jam.”

He says that he saw the road was congested. “To be congested” (congested) is similar to a “traffic jam,” when you have many cars that are moving very slowly. Usually, there is not a lot of space – a lot of room in between the cars. Other things can be “congested” as well. If a person says, “I’m feeling a little congested,” they mean that they have a cold or something that makes it difficult for them to breathe. Here, “congested” refers to the cars.

The person in our story has to take a bridge to reach downtown. A “bridge” is a part of the road that is built over another road or water, so that people can go across, from one side to the other. If you have a river, you will usually have a bridge so you can go from one side to the other – without swimming, that is!

The person says here that he had no choice but to stay on the road. The expression “to have no choice but to do something” means that you are forced to do something. You have no other option; no other choice to do anything except whatever it is that you have to do. In this case, the person has to stay on the road he is on because he has to take the bridge, and that is the only way to get to downtown.

He describes the traffic as being “bumper-to-bumper.” The “bumper” (bumper) is the front and back of your car. There are long pieces of metal, usually, at the front and the back, so that if you have an accident – if someone hits you – the bumper will help prevent them from ruining your car. It depends on how hard they hit you, of course. The expression “bumper-to-bumper” means that the cars are very close to each other; they’re going very slowly, almost touching. Again, this is because of the traffic jam.

He says in our story that one crazy driver, which would be everyone in Los Angeles, tried to drive on the shoulder to get around the backup. The “shoulder” of a road is the side of the road, usually on a freeway or highway. And it is a place where you can stop your car if you have an emergency. We call that the “shoulder.” “Shoulder” has a couple of other meanings in English; take a look at our Learning Guide for further explanation of that, as well as the word “bridge,” which I used earlier.

The driver – the crazy driver – is driving on the shoulder to get around the backup. “Backup” here is the area where the cars are moving slowly or not at all



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because there's too much traffic. It's really just another word, here, for the traffic jam – the congestion – the bumper-to-bumper cars; all of these refer to the same thing. But, there wasn't any way to bypass the traffic. To "bypass" (bypass) means to go around something.

There was no way to bypass the traffic because the backup wasn't due to an accident, a stalled car or some rubbernecks. When we say a car is "stalled" (stalled) we mean that it has stopped working, but it is still on the road or on the freeway. So, a car that suddenly stops moving forward – stops working – that would be a "stalled" car. Usually, there is some problem with the "motor," or the engine – unless you forgot to put gasoline in the car, and then you would be considered, hmm, not very intelligent!

Back to our story: One of the other things that can cause a traffic jam is rubbernecks. This is an interesting term; a "rubbernecker" (all one word – rubbernecker) is a person who slows down his car to look out the window to see an accident. This, of course, causes all of the other cars behind him to move more slowly. So, a "rubbernecker" is a person who, when they get close to an accident, slows down and turns to look at it. This is very common here in Southern California, and it is a problem because people, of course, are making the situation worse by stopping and looking at it. It's called a "rubbernecker" because people are turning or bending their necks, and rubber is a very flexible material, so it is as if you had a neck of rubber because you're turning it, in this case.

Unfortunately, the real problem was road construction. "Road construction" is when the government is fixing the road, usually causing part of the road to be closed. There was only one lane (lane) open. A "lane" is the space on the road between the painted lines that is supposed to tell you where one line of cars should be driving. So in Los Angeles, in our freeways, we have five, six, sometimes eight lanes of cars. These are like eight lines of cars divided by white lines on the road – painted on the road. These are lanes. You can have lanes on the freeway; you can have lanes just on a regular street.

Well, after 25 minutes of stop-and-go traffic, the person in our story was at his wit's end. "Stop-and-go traffic" is the same as "bumper-to-bumper traffic" – congested traffic. This is when cars can go forward and then they have to stop, and then they go forward and then they have to stop. The person is at their wit's (wit's) end. "To be at your wit's end" is to be very frustrated, to be desperate, feeling like you are going to go crazy. This is how I feel when I am behind a rubbernecker!



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The date of the man in the story – the woman – is waiting for him at a restaurant, and he does not have her cell phone number. Not very smart!

Well finally, he gets past the road construction, and he had to drive a little recklessly. “To drive recklessly” (recklessly) means not carefully or dangerously – “recklessly.” He had to make up, he says, “for lost time.” “To make up for lost time” means to do something quickly – something very fast – because you weren’t able to do it earlier. In this case, he has to drive quickly because he couldn’t drive fast before, when he was in the traffic jam.

He says at the end of the story, “The last thing I wanted was to make her” – my date – “think that I stood her up!” “To stand someone up” means to make an appointment or a date with someone, and then not go to that appointment and not call them and tell them that you are not going. It’s, of course, a very impolite, rude thing to do, to stand someone up.

Now let’s listen to the story, this time at a normal speed.

[start of story]

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Finally, I got past the road construction and was on my way again. I drove a little recklessly, but I had to make up for lost time. I really liked this girl. The last thing I wanted was to make her think that I stood her up!

[end of story]

The script for this episode was written by Dr. Lucy Tse.



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From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time on ESL Podcast.

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