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TOPICS

United States Postal Service, summer camp, whereas vs. but, RSVP (again), to not be able to make heads or tails of something

GLOSSARY

mail carrier – a person who collects and delivers mail and packages

* I've been waiting for an important letter, but the mail carrier hasn't come by yet today.

mailbox – a box or container at a home or business where mail is delivered

* There was a lot of mail in the mailbox when we returned from our vacation.

FedEx – short for Federal Express; a company that delivers packages and can often do so in one day

* This contract needs to be signed by tomorrow. Make sure you send it by FedEx today.

parcel – package; often a box that is mailed

* Are you planning on going to the post office to mail that parcel?

summer camp – a program where children or teenagers go to learn or to do fun activities during the summer months

* Which summer camp do you think Marina will like? A sports camp or an art camp?

camper – a person who attends summer camp; or someone who spends a vacation living in a tent

* After a long day outdoors, the campers were tired and asleep by 9 PM.

campfire – an outdoor fire used for cooking or for social activity

* We built a campfire after dark and played music and talked all night.

to roast – to cook using a fire or using high heat in an oven

* I'm hungry. Let's roast some hot dogs over the fire.



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marshmallows – a food (candy) that is soft, sweet, and usually white in color
* I like melting and eating warm marshmallows with crackers.

camp counselor – a person who works at a summer camp for children or teenagers and who organizes activities and takes care of the campers
* When she was in high school, she worked as a camp counselor for two summers.

whereas – a conjunction used to show the difference, or contrast, between two things
* I like Brazilian food, whereas my wife prefers Chilean food.

to not be able to make heads or tails of (something) – to not understand something
* We couldn't make heads or tails of the letter we got from the government about the new health plan.



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ENGLISH LEARNING TIPS

There are two different ways you can “know” a language. One way is “learning.” Learning is **conscious** knowledge of a language. This includes knowing the formal rules of grammar, for example, such as the rules for using the present progressive or knowing the difference between a prefix and a suffix. This kind of knowledge is what you usually get from studying in a class or from a grammar book.

The other way to know a language is “acquisition.” Acquisition is **unconscious** (or subconscious) knowledge of language, the sort of knowledge you don’t have to memorize or even think about. (The verb is “to acquire.”) Babies and children acquire their first or native language without having to think about it. They don’t study grammar books or memorize vocabulary; they just listen and watch, and the rest comes naturally.

You can acquire a language without learning it, and you can learn much about a language without acquiring it. Babies acquire language but don’t learn it. Many adults study hard in school to learn a language, but never are able to acquire it very well. Part of the reason is that many older students confuse learning with acquisition. They believe that if they learn a language – study all of the rule of grammar– that they will be able to speak and write fluently. But that isn’t true. Just learning a language isn’t enough.

The reason learning isn’t enough is because most of the time when we listen, talk, read, and write, we are using our unconscious knowledge, our acquisition. We don’t even have to think about it. Learning can sometimes help us, but the most important type of knowledge to focus on is still acquisition. If you want to become fluent in a language, you must **acquire** it.



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 44.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 44. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California. On today's Café, we're going to talk about the United States Postal Service: how it works, how much it costs to send a letter, and other information. We will also look at a very popular custom, or a popular tradition in the United States, and that is summer camp. And as always, we'll answer a few questions. Now let's get started.

We remind you, as always, to go to our website at eslpod.com. You can get the Learning Guide for this podcast, which includes the complete transcript as well as vocabulary and tips on improving your English.

Our first topic today is the United States Postal Service, what most people in the United States simply call the "post office," where you send messages, or rather send letters and packages. The United States Post Office is a government organization, like most countries, and it is a very large organization. In fact, it is the third largest employer in the United States. So if it were a company, it would be the third largest company in the United States. The number one employer, in case you're interested, in the U.S, is the United States Department of Defense: the army, the navy, the marine corps, the air force, and the other, what we would call Armed Services or parts, of the Defense Department. And the second largest employer, interestingly, is "Wal-Mart." Wal-Mart is, you may know, a large store. They sell all sorts of things: they sell food, clothing, many other things, and they're very popular in many cities. We don't have a lot of Wal-Marts here in Los Angeles, at least not near to where I live.

Well, getting back to the post office, the people who work for the post office, we used to call the "postman." This was when most of the workers at the post office were men. Nowadays, we usually say "postal carrier." A "carrier" is the person who delivers the mail to your house. Now, in most U.S. cities, there's only one mail delivery a day. And it depends on where you live, what time that will come. It could come in the morning; it could come in the afternoon. We usually get our mail here about 11 AM, but sometimes we get it at 5 PM. It depends on who's working I guess, and how busy they are. Now, Americans love to complain about



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the post office, and how slow it is, and that's probably true in many countries. You complain about the postal service, or the amount of time it takes to get a letter delivered. But in fact, the U.S. postal service is probably pretty good for the price that you pay to mail a letter. In the United States, most letters cost about 39 cents. 39 cents. So, it's less than a half of a dollar, and that's anywhere in the United States, including Hawaii and Alaska, Puerto Rico - any territory, we would say, any possession of the United States, it's 39 cents. And that's for a typical letter. A letter has to weigh less than, I think, one ounce for 39 cents, to put a 39 cent stamp. Now if it's a heavy package, it will cost you more money. I'm not sure exactly how much it is, but it's more if you have a very heavy package. But if you're mailing a letter, a simple letter, a couple of pages, that will be 39 cents.

I was saying that the people who work at the post office to deliver your mail are called the "mail carriers." The mail carriers in the U.S., most of them drive a very interesting type of car. It's not a car, it's a truck. It's a small truck, however, and it's one of the few types of cars or trucks in the U.S. where the driver is on the right side of the mail truck. In the U.S., you probably know, we drive on the right side of the road, or the right hand side, and we sit on the left side of the car. But mail trucks have the driver sitting on the right side of the car. Though they do not drive on the left side of the road, I hope. And the reason is that many, in many places the mailbox - and a "mailbox" is a container where you can put the letters that are delivered. When the postal carrier comes to your house, he puts your letters in a mailbox, and these mailboxes are sometimes on the road. They're located not on the house, but next to the road. This is true for people who live outside of the big cities. Although some cities like Phoenix, Arizona, where I lived, also used these boxes. And if the driver of the truck is on the right side of the car, he or she doesn't have to get out of their truck, their mail truck, to deliver the mail, to put it into your mailbox.

I said Americans like to complain about how slow the mail is, and because of that, there have been some companies that have started, that also will deliver letters and packages for you at a much faster rate, at...much more quickly. However, these cost more money. If you want to send a letter to New York City from Los Angeles, it would probably cost you 12 or 13 dollars to mail it with Federal Express, and/or the United Parcel Service. Those are two of the biggest companies. Most people just call them "FedEx," that stands for Federal Express, and that's a private company that delivers packages all over the world, really. The other popular company here is called the "United Parcel Service." A "parcel," is another name for a package. And United Parcel Service delivery costs about



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the same as a Federal Express. Most people use United Parcel Service for big packages. They are, I think, a little less expensive, a little cheaper, if you are sending a box of books, for example. You can also send things at a slow rate using UPS. It's very easy to identify a United Parcel Service employee because all of the trucks are brown, and all of the employees that deliver packages are also wearing brown, and many of them wear brown shorts. So if you see a brown truck and someone wearing brown clothes inside, that's probably, here in the United States, a UPS employee. And both Federal Express and UPS are very popular because people want to make sure that their letter arrives. Again, for most mail, however, we use the government postal service, the government post office. Only for, maybe, very important things, or things that you need to get there tomorrow, if you want it to get there right away, you would probably use FedEx or UPS. There's also other services, one that is popular internationally, is called DHL. But, FedEx and UPS are the two most common. So that's a little bit about mailing a letter in the United States or a package. Just to give you an idea: a package that you mail within the United States, say from California to Texas, if you're mailing a book, it will probably cost you a couple of dollars. So, it's still not very expensive to mail things in the United States.

The second topic we're going to talk about today is summer camp. Now "summer camp" is a very popular custom, a very popular practice, for children and for teenagers. And a summer camp is usually located away from the big cities, near a lake for example, or near a big park, and summer camps are places where children go for a week, or two weeks, sometimes for five weeks, and they live with other children. And the purpose of the camp is to, basically, to entertain the children, to keep them busy during the summertime because there is no school during the summer. And it's also to try to teach them things, not necessarily things like math or science or history, but rather it teaches them practical things, and so they learn different sports, for example. I'm not sure if that's practical, but that is a very popular thing in a summer camp. Traditionally, the people who go to these camps, the children are called campers, and the camps usually have activities such as "hiking," where you walk in the woods, or you walk up a mountain. Canoeing is very popular if it is a camp near a lake. A "canoe" is a little boat that you use sticks - we call those sticks "paddles" - you use paddles to move the boat, and that's a canoe. Usually canoes have two, sometimes three or four people in them. Well, canoeing, which would be from the verb "to canoe," and hiking are very popular at summer camps. Also very popular, in the evening time at night, they usually have campfires. "Campfire" is all one word. Campfires, "s" at the end for the plural, and these are, usually, you can guess,



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circles on the ground, and they put wood in the circle, and they start a fire. And it's the tradition to sing around the campfire. It's also very traditional to roast food such as hot dogs. And "to roast" means to cook using the flame of the fire, directly in the fire. Another popular thing with a campfire is to roast "marshmallows," and those are small, white, almost like candy, but they're very soft, and they are very good when you heat them up. They become brown on the outside, and they're soft on the inside and they are warm. I'm getting hungry just talking about that. So roasting marshmallows is a very traditional activity at these camps.

Many of the camps have special classes, and you can send your child to, for example, a summer camp for musicians, and if your child likes to play music, they have classes in music. Some summer camps are for children who are interested in computers, and they will have computers with special classes. Sometimes the camps are for those who are in some religious organization. There are also summer camps now for children who need to lose weight. Not a very fun way to spend your summer, but those have become more popular. Most of the camps, I said, are located outside of the big cities. Sometimes, however, there'll be camps where a child goes to a building in the city somewhere, and goes all day and then comes home at night. So it's not quite the same experience, and usually those are camps that have a specific interest, a ballet camp, or a dancing camp, would be examples of that. The people who work at a summer camp are called "camp counselors" and these camp counselors are usually in charge of or responsible for a group of kids, and they are often high school and college students who need some work during the summer time. There are also camps that are run by organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and those are volunteer organizations for children. I myself never went to a summer camp. Well, that's not quite true. I did go to a summer camp when I was in sixth grade, between my fifth and sixth grade in school, in elementary school. I went for one week, and I absolutely hated it. It was the worst experience of my life; I have to be honest. Other people I am sure have had better experiences at camp. But I'm not an outdoors sort of person. I don't...I like to be inside my house drinking a soda, watching television. To me, that is my ideal vacation. Well, I'm exaggerating a little bit.

Now let's answer a few questions. Our first question comes from Li Dong who is now living in the United States. The question has to do with the difference between "whereas" and "but." When do you use whereas, all one word, and when do you use but, and is there a difference. Well, both of these words can be



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used in the same sentence to mean the same thing. For example: “I live here, whereas he lives there.” We use it to compare one thing to another, in this case, or to talk about something that’s different from the first example: “I live here, whereas he lives there.” I could also say: “I live here, but he lives there.” It really means the same thing; there’s no difference in meaning. The word whereas, however, is not very common in English. You will probably see that in writing, but not so much hear it in a normal conversation. It is much better and probably easier just to use the word “but” in these cases, but if you see the word whereas you will know what it means. “But” has many uses, and the comparison of two things that are different is just one use in but. So while you can use but in most places you can use whereas, you can’t use whereas in some of the places where you would use but. So but is a safer, easier choice in most cases.

The second question is not actually a question; it’s a correction from Pierre in France. I talked about, back on Podcast number 174 when the topic was a potluck or a potluck dinner, I used the expression RSVP, which means to call a person and tell them that you will come to their party or come to their event. So when you’re invited to something, the invitation will often say please RSVP, or simply RSVP. It comes from the French expression, and in Podcast 174, I said it was “repondez s’il vous plaît,” and Pierre says that’s not correct French. It should be “repondez s’il vous plaît.” And my French is not very good, so excusez-moi. But thank you, Pierre, for writing in, and my apologies to the French speakers for getting that wrong. I still need to improve my French, which is not very good at all.

Our final question today comes from Ray in Tokyo. Ray’s question is about an expression that he read, which said that the person couldn’t make heads or tails of the situation. The expression “to make heads or tails of (something)” means to make sense of something, to understand something, usually something that is very confusing or difficult to comprehend. For example, if you don’t speak Japanese, and you try to read a Japanese newspaper, you probably “would not be able to make heads or tails of it,” meaning that you wouldn’t be able to understand anything about it. So when we say we can’t make heads or tails of something, we mean I can’t understand anything, it’s very confusing to me. “Heads” and “tails” are words that we also use for the two sides of a coin, like a dime or a quarter or some coin we say that there is a heads and there is a tails. The head side is with the picture of whoever is on the coin, and the tail is another word for the back of the coin. So when someone says they can’t make heads or tails of something, that might come from the fact that if you take a coin and you



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can't understand which side is which because it is so old, for example, that might be the origin of that expression, I'm not sure. But to make heads or tails of something, usually that is in the negative, to not be able to make heads or tails of something means that you can't understand it.

Well I hope you were able to understand us today. If you have a question that you would like to have answered on the English Café, all you have to do is email me at eslpod@eslpod.com. We'll try to answer your question in a future Café.

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

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