



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 206

TOPICS

NASA; Famous Americans: Jackie Robinson; conference versus meeting versus session; second to none; narrative versus story

GLOSSARY

outer space – the area beyond our planet, where one can find moons, stars, other planets, galaxies, and other things that are very far away

* Jan believes that there is life in outer space, but Olivia doesn't think so.

to spur on – to encourage, help, or cause something to happen

* The people watching the game cheered loudly to spur on the team.

space race – the competition between countries to have the highest achievements in exploring space

* One goal during the space race was to be the first nation to land a man on the moon.

advocate – a person who wants something to happen and tries to make other people believe the same thing

* After Jiyoung found out that her mother had cancer, she became an advocate for more money going to cancer research.

to orbit – to go around a planet; to move in a circle around something else

* How many moons orbit the planet Jupiter?

height of (something) – the highest or best point of something

* She was a very popular singer at the height of the jazz era.

league – a group of sports teams that play against each other each year to see which team is the best

* Omar is the best player in the league, with the best record of any player in the past 10 years.

segregated – with people of different races separated; with people of different races not allowed to visit the same places, use the same facilities, or to do the same thing together at the same time

* Before the 1960s, some towns had segregated public bathrooms and drinking fountains for whites and non-whites.



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fan – a person who likes something very much and spends a lot of time enjoying it; a person who admires someone or something

* I'm a big fan of this TV show and never miss an episode.

racial slur – a rude, mean, and inappropriate comment about someone's skin color

* We will not allow any student to use racial slurs in this school, even as jokes.

to unify – to bring things or people together as a group

* After the election, the president tried to unify the people by hiring officials with different political views.

prestigious – important and highly respected

* We want to invite a prestigious person to speak at our high school graduation.

meeting – a gathering of people for a specific purpose, such as talking about an issue or making decisions

* Let's have a meeting with the parents of our students before we make changes to next year's school schedule.

conference – a gathering of people for a common purpose; an event held about a topic where people can attend many different short sessions or lectures on different aspects of that topic.

* Diana and Kim will be attending the marketing conference next month to find out about the new trends.

session – a particular meeting or gathering about a specific topic, often within a larger conference, usually for a short period of time

* At 9:00, I'm going to a session on home-based business, but I'm skipping the 11:00 session on business taxes.

second to none – the best; the first; the winner

* I've heard from friends that the ice cream at this store is second to none.

narrative – an account of events, whether written or spoken

* Fill out these insurance forms. On the back, write a narrative of what happened in the accident.

story – an account of events, whether written or spoken; a piece of fiction that is shorter than a novel (book); a news article or broadcast

* Grandma told us a story about the worst snowstorm in history.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

“Casey at the Bat” – Poem by Ernest Thayer

Whether they are baseball fans or not, Americans all know about “Casey at the Bat.” “Casey at the Bat” is a poem written in 1888 by Ernest Thayer about a baseball game. This game takes place in the “fictional” (not real) town of Mudville, where many fans have come to watch this important game.

In the poem, the “home team” (the team from the town where the game is played) is losing. The fans want the “star player” (best player) named Casey to “come up to bat” (be the next to try to hit the ball). When “mighty” (strong) Casey comes up to bat, he is very confident. In baseball, the “batter” (person trying to hit the ball) gets three “strikes,” which means the player gets three chances to hit the ball. When he or she has received three strikes, the player is said to have “struck out,” and his or her turn is over.

In this poem, when Casey comes up to bat, he is so confident that he doesn’t even try to hit the first two balls thrown at him. He just stands there with a smile on his face. Finally, he has one last chance to hit the ball in order to win the game. The fans are “cheering” (shouting encouragement) and everyone is waiting for the last “pitch” (throw) of the ball. These are the last lines of the poem:

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville – mighty Casey has struck out.*

Mighty Casey, who was so confident – perhaps too confident – has failed to hit the ball. The team lost the game.

This poem and story is well known to Americans. It is often “recited” (said from memory) and “acted out” (said while doing actions).



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 206.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 206. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in, you know, beautiful Los Angeles, California.

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On this Café, we're going to talk about NASA, which is a government agency whose full name is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Then we're going to continue our series on famous Americans, focusing on a famous baseball player, Jackie Robinson, who was the first African American or black person to play Major League Baseball. And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

This Café begins with a discussion about a U.S. government agency called NASA, which stands for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The word "aeronautics" means flying, or what we might call, simply, aviation. "Space" comes from the expression "outer space" and means the area beyond our planet, where the moons and the stars and other planets are, things that are very far away.

NASA was established or created in 1958 to build the American space program, our efforts to learn more about outer space and ultimately to send astronauts into space. An "astronaut" is someone who flies into space to do research or to collect information.

NASA's creation was spurred on by the Soviet Union's space program. The phrase "to spur on" means to cause something to happen, to encourage or to help something. For example, students who are very competitive, who want to win, might be spurred on by other high-performing students. If they see another student doing well in their class, that might spur them on – encourage them to study more or to do better on the next test. In the same way, when the Soviet Union's space program – back when there was a Soviet Union – had success in the late 1950s and was clearly doing better than the United States' space



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program, this spurred on Americans to try to beat the Soviet Union – to be better than the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union launched a satellite called Sputnik, Americans became afraid that the Soviet Union was getting more powerful than us, and so we had to do something. This was called, in the 1950s and 60s, the space race, trying to get machines, satellites, and men into outer space. Americans believed it was very important to send people into space before the Soviet Union could do it. It was, I suppose, a matter of national pride, but some people thought it was also a matter of security.

President John F. Kennedy, who was elected in 1960, became a very important advocate for space exploration. An “advocate” is a person who wants to do something, who wants to make something happen, and so tries to convince other people that this is a good idea. Kennedy very famously said that we want to have a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s – in other words, by the end of 10 years.

In 1961, an astronaut named Alan Shepard became the first American in space. Seven months later another astronaut, John Glenn, became the first American to “orbit,” or go around the entire planet. The height of the space race was definitely 1969, when Americans Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first men to walk on the moon. The phrase “the height of (something)” means the highest or best point of something. Having people walk on the moon was the height of the space program. I remember this very well; in fact, we just celebrated the 40th anniversary of this event. When I was young child – I was five years old at the time – I remember watching the first men walk on the moon on television, as did, of course, millions and millions of other people throughout the world.

The space race, in some ways, ended in 1969, but NASA continues to do a lot of space research and send astronauts into space. However, NASA’s work is no longer an important priority for, I think, many Americans. Exploring space is no longer seen as being as important as it used to, so NASA doesn’t get as much money as they used to back in the 1960s and 1970s, although some people do want the programs to continue.

In 2004, President George Bush created something called the Vision for Space Exploration. It was a new plan for NASA. NASA had, during the 1980s in particular, had gone through some difficult times; they had some unsuccessful space launches where people were killed, and this caused a lot of problems – a lot of criticism of NASA. Former President Bush tried to encourage NASA to continue its work; in fact, one of the parts of this new plan that he proposed in



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2004 was to put Americans back on the moon by the year 2018. Americans have also been told that NASA will try to put someone on the planet of Mars by the year 2037. However, these are just plans, and unless the government actually gives NASA money it's not likely that we will ever actually see those things happen, but you never know.

NASA is an important part of 20th century American culture. There were lots of books and movies about the U.S. space program. One of the most famous books was by a very well-known writer, Tom Wolfe, called The Right Stuff, and it's a book that was later made into a movie about the early astronauts and the culture of the early astronauts. It's actually quite an interesting look at American competitiveness.

We turn now to another type of American competitiveness: sports. We're going to continue our series on Famous Americans by talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson was the first black or African American baseball player in what we call Major League Baseball. A "league" is a group of teams that play against each other each year, or each season. Major League Baseball is the top level of professional baseball in the United States.

For more than 60 years, Major League Baseball in the 20th century was "segregated," meaning that blacks were separated from whites – blacks couldn't play on the teams that the white players played on. This seemed normal to Americans at the time, because many parts of American society were segregation in the early 20th and mid 20th centuries. Of course, they were also segregated before then, but we're talking here about the 20th century. For example, blacks and whites had to use different public bathrooms, they, many times, had to sit on different parts of the public busses, and used even different doors to enter public buildings. So, segregation was common in the U.S., including in American sports.

Jackie Robinson, however, changed all of that. Robinson was born in Georgia in 1919, but his family soon moved to Southern California, to Pasadena. Robinson went to school and became an incredible athlete. Not only could he play baseball, he could play football, basketball, tennis; he was also an excellent runner, so he was on his high school track team. He was an amazing athlete, and soon after he graduated from high school he began to play at one of local colleges, Pasadena Junior College. And then, in 1939, he transferred to the University of California Los Angeles here in L.A., what we normally just call UCLA, by its initials. Jackie Robinson was an incredible athlete at UCLA, perhaps one of the best athletes the school has ever seen.



After World War II, Robinson began to play in what are called – what were called the Negro Leagues. Negro is an old term – an old word that was used in the early 20th century to describe black people or African American people. It is no longer used; in fact, it is now considered an insult. You would never want to use that word in describing an African American or a black person; you say African American or black. But in that time, Negro was the word that was used, and the Negro Leagues were baseball “leagues,” groups of teams of baseball players who were all African American. And so, Jackie Robinson got his start in baseball playing on these Negro League teams.

However, he was such a good player – such an amazingly good player that other professional teams start to look at the Negro Leagues to look at some of these good African American players, and some teams decided that they were going to start to hire – start to get some African American players on their team. Jackie Robinson was first hired to be part of the Minor League teams. A Minor League team is a group of teams that are at the very top level. Major League Baseball is the top level; Minor League Baseball is a level below that, the players aren’t quite as good.

Many teams, however, didn’t like the fact that Jackie Robinson was playing even in these Minor League teams. He played for a team called the Montreal Royals, which was actually in Florida. Many players refused to play with Jackie Robinson because he was black. In fact, sometimes the team would go and travel to another city and the game was canceled; they wouldn’t let Jackie Robinson play.

However, in 1947 Robinson was asked to play for a Major League team, for a team then called the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was the first African American to play Major League Baseball. Many of his white team members were unhappy about this, but the manager didn’t give them a choice. The manager said he didn’t care what color he was, that he was going to allow Robinson to play on his team. And so in 1947, even though most of America was still very segregated, Jackie Robinson broke or crossed that color line – that line that divided blacks and whites – by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

During the games, other teams and “fans,” people watching the games, would often yell at Robinson using racial slurs. A “racial slur” (slur) is a rude, mean, or inappropriate comment about someone’s skin color. However, these racial slurs actually helped to unify the Dodgers as a team – to make the team feel like a single team, and it probably helped some of the white players be more welcoming to Robinson when they saw how badly Robinson was treated.



The games where Robinson played, interestingly enough, always had a very high attendance, meaning there were lots of people who wanted to come and see this African American player play baseball. Whether or not people approved of him being a player, everyone wanted to see the games. It's what everybody was talking about back in 1947 and 1948. Unfortunately, Robinson was discriminated against in many places where he traveled, but he was a very strong character. He was someone who was tough and he decided to continue playing.

Robinson obviously had a very important impact on American culture; people could now see blacks and whites participating in the same sport. He was also, however, more than just an African American baseball player, he was a truly great baseball player. In fact, he was such a good baseball player that in 1962 he was made part of the Baseball Hall of Fame. A Hall of Fame is an honor given to the very best players in a particular sport.

Robinson, unhappily, died very young; he was only 53 years old when he died in 1972. I said that Robinson played for the Brooklyn Dodgers, but in the late 1950s the Brooklyn Dodgers moved from New York City, where Brooklyn is, to the West Coast – to here, to California in Los Angeles, and so now we have the Los Angeles Dodgers. Beginning in 1958, the team changed cities and Robinson came here and also played here in Los Angeles.

Because of Robinson's accomplishments – because of his courage and because he was such a good baseball player, the Major League Baseball organization honored him by doing something called retiring his number. To retire someone's number in a sport means that nobody else on that team can use that number in the future. Players on baseball teams and football teams and basketball teams have a number on their shirt; everyone has a different number. But when there's a really great baseball player for a team, after that player retires sometimes the team will retire the number, meaning nobody else on that team, in the future, can have that number because that player was so good, and usually they'll put that number up in the stadium – in the baseball stadium where the game is played. In 1997, however, the organization of Major League Baseball, on the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's first game, decided to retire the number for all teams. So, the number 42, which was Jackie Robinson's number, cannot be used by any Major League Baseball player again. In fact, in the last few years it has become common on the 15th of April, which is the first day that Robinson played for the Brooklyn Dodgers, that all members of all the baseball teams wear 42. That's the only day that they're allowed to wear that number, and everyone wears the same number. Again, this is to honor Jackie Robinson and his great



achievements. Robinson has been honored in other ways in American sports and in American culture, and almost every American knows about Jackie Robinson.

After Robinson retired from baseball, he also began to work on the television stations that were broadcasting baseball games. He became the first African American television analyst. An “analyst” is someone who describes what’s going on in the game and gives their opinion about it. He was also the first African American vice-president of a American corporation. He also created one of the first African American owned and controlled banks, called Freedom National Bank.

In recognition for all his accomplishments, Robinson received two very “prestigious” or important awards: the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. In 1999, Time magazine, a weekly national magazine, named him one of the 100 most influential people in the 20th century.

Now let’s answer some your questions.

Our first question comes from Vicky (Vicky) in China. Vicky wants to know the meanings of the words “conference,” “meeting,” and “session.” When do we use each of these words?

A meeting is when people come together for a specific purpose, such as talking about a question or making decisions. You can have a meeting in your workplace, where your boss and several other people may come together and talk about something and make a decision. That’s a meeting. Or, you could have a meeting between just two people, at a café, who are talking about some business-related issue.

A conference is usually a larger event, when there are many different people who come together, and sometimes there are several different meetings in the conference. So the conference is a large meeting, which may have many smaller meetings as part of it. Those smaller meetings are usually called sessions. So you have a specific meeting within a larger conference about a specific topic. So, it could be a conference about teaching English as a second language, and at that conference there will be many different sessions – smaller meetings, presentations, discussions about things.

So, meeting is a general term that you can use to describe small or large gatherings of people. A conference is usually a formal meeting, usually a large



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event that has several smaller meetings or smaller sessions, we would call them. Conferences are often held at large hotels that have many smaller rooms for the different sessions, as part of the conference.

Fernando (Fernando) from Mexico wants to know the meaning of the expression “second to none.” Second to none means the best, the very first, the winner of something. “This cooking is second to none,” meaning no one is better; it is not in second place to anyone, it is in first place.

Finally Diasuke (Diasuke) in Japan wants to know the difference between a “narrative” and a “story.” Both narrative and story can be used to describe an account or a telling of things that happened, either true things or invented things (made up things). It could be written, it could be spoken, it could be a piece of fiction, it could be a book about something that’s true or real.

Both of those words, then, can be used to describe those situations. However, a story is a more general word. A story can also describe, for example, something on the news or something in a newspaper. Narrative has a more formal use; if someone talks about narrative, they’re usually talking about something related to a university or academic publication, or perhaps talking about a great novel, what we would call literary topics.

When you’re talking about a story or novel, the word “narrative” is sometimes the telling of the story by one person and is just one part of the story. You could have a story that had dialogue, where two people are talking to each other, or it could have narrative, where one person is describing something that’s happening. So in that meaning, narrative is part of a story. But in more general terms, narrative and story mean basically the same thing; but story has a broader usage both formal and informal, and narrative tends to be a little more formal.

If you have a question about formal or informal English, you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. If you’re interested in supporting ESL Podcast, you can also send us a donation by going to our eslpod.com website, or you can become a Learning Guide member and get all the additional benefits of our Learning Guides.

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

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