

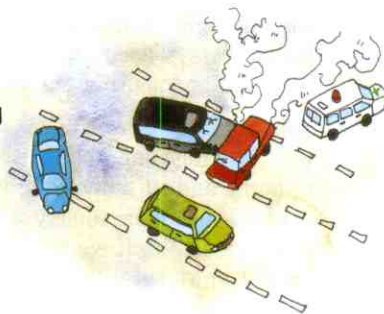
ISSUE 23

Traffic Accidents

It's amazing how a nation's culture is revealed by its traffic patterns. I don't mean just whether one drives on the left or right side of the road. In Japan, cars move in nice, neat little grid patterns. It is nearly always orderly, and precisely controlled. In England, it is more individualistic, but polite; for instance, people mostly stay in one lane and maintain a uniform speed, whatever people in other lanes are doing. Somehow, Americans seem to combine a defensive driving strategy with one that freely violates the law, in terms of speed limits in particular. I remember my Canadian friends laughingly referring to a "Yankee stop" to describe slowing down for a stop sign but not quite coming to a full halt before driving through the intersection. In Korea, I guess the best description of the competitive way most people drive would be to call it Traffic Tetris — any gap between speeding motorists will immediately be filled, as though there's something in the Korean nature that abhors a vacuum.

What are the main causes of traffic accidents?

- (1) Violating traffic rules
- (2) Speeding
- (3) Driving drunk
- (4) Using a mobile phone while driving
- (5) Outdated traffic system
- (6) Being distracted
- (7) Being over-confident of one's driving skills



Sample Answers

(A) Violating traffic laws is the biggest cause of accidents. They can be broken many ways: by not following speed limits, by not obeying traffic signs, and so forth. The rules are designed to protect us, not to punish us, even though sometimes they seem inconvenient. Nevertheless, if everyone would obey them, there would be far fewer accidents.

(B) Overconfidence is a serious problem. Unless people are careful, they think they cannot ever make mistakes — and then they start making more of them! While it is important to have a strong belief in one's own ability, having a *sense of perspective* and self-criticism is also important. No one is perfect, and knowing our limitations is extremely important. So, people who are overconfident don't care where they are going when they drive, they don't notice that they are going too fast, they cannot be patient behind the wheel, and they cause a lot of accidents by not paying attention.

Speak Your Mind

1. Do you always *obey* the traffic rules?
Why or why not?
2. Have you ever driven 150 km per hour or faster?
Why or why not?
3. What are the traffic rules people break most often?
4. Why do some people drink and drive?
5. Are there too many cars on the road?
How could car ownership be *curbed*?
Would there be any bad side effects if that happened?

Speak Your Mind Helpers

1. Do you always obey the traffic rules? Why or why not?

(A)

Sometimes I *absent-mindedly* fail to pay attention to how fast I'm driving. I'll suddenly *catch myself* going way over the speed limit. Then I immediately slow down. It isn't a *deliberate* attempt to break the law, it's just being absent-minded.

(B)

The only way to drive in this country is to *ignore* the law, because no one else is obeying it. If I actually followed the rules in a strict manner, I'd probably end up causing an accident. But by knowing that *anarchy* is the only law of the highway here, I'm able to take advantage of the *shifting* opportunities and arrive at my *destination* quickly and safely.

2. Have you ever driven 150 km per hour or faster? Why or why not?

(A)

It's very hard to even think about such speeds in the crowded urban setting I drive in. There simply is no space available, though almost everybody is slightly over the speed limit. But every once in a while I take a drive on a rural expressway and I can drive as fast as my car will go. It's an *exhilarating* sense of freedom to glide down the highway in that manner.

(B)

Anyone who would even think about driving that fast must be crazy. Neither our roads nor our engines are engineered for that kind of speed. But, even more important, neither are our driving habits. On the Autobahn in Germany, people are used to driving as fast as they can, and not only the highway itself but also the powerful German cars are designed for that purpose, and people are taught to drive accordingly; but here, we are more *cramped* in our geography and attitudes.

3. What are the traffic rules people break most often?

(A)

Almost everywhere, I think speed limits are pretty uniformly ignored. We are all impatient to get where we are going as soon as we can and dislike having our impulses controlled. We also know that most of the time we can *get away with* speeding, since there are not enough highway patrolmen available to regulate it completely.

(B)

The most dangerous habitual traffic violations are at the *intersections*. There is a yellow warning light to inform drivers to stop, but it *serves* only to *spur* them to speed up instead, so they can drive through before the light turns red. What I see most of the time is that when the light turns red, one or two — or more — cars at the front of the line will keep going anyway instead of stopping. What makes the situation worse is that the stopped traffic (and especially buses and motorbikes) will anticipate the changing light and begin before the signal turns green. So we get people violating the traffic light at both ends of the cycle. It's a wonder we don't have even more traffic accidents than we do.

4. Why do some people drink and drive?

(A)

The reason people should not drive after they've had some alcohol is because their judgment is seriously *impaired*. But, because their reasoning is improperly functioning, they don't properly consider how dangerous it is to drive under the influence of alcohol, and so they do it. If they had not been drinking, they would know not to drive drunk, but because they are drunk they don't know anything very well.

(B)

A lot of people fail to realize just how *inebriated* they are. As far as they can tell, their vision and *reflexes* and judgment don't seem to be impaired at all, so they don't think they are a threat to themselves or others. They falsely believe that they are superior to the blood-alcohol content, not understanding that even small *deteriorations* of our hand-eye coordination can be *fatal*.

Speak Your Mind

Speak Your Mind Helpers

5. Are there too many cars on the road? How could car ownership be curbed? Would there be any bad side effects if that happened?

M : Whew! Traffic sure is terrible today. It seems like we've been parked here without moving for a half hour.

F : Well, we've moved a bit I suppose, but we sure haven't gone far. There must be an accident ahead.

M : I guess so. But the main problem is that there are just too many cars on the road. I have no idea where they all park at night!

F : I can remember when hardly anybody had a car here. And now it seems like everyone does. It's not just one car per household, it's like one per adult.

M : Right. And the result is not just bad traffic, like now, but also higher gasoline costs and more pollution. These cars are killing us!

F : Yes, and not only by way of crashes. We should be able to do something about the situation, though.

M : Sure! Raise the taxes on cars and license plates. That should reduce the demand.

F : But wouldn't that be unfair if only the wealthy could afford an automobile? How would poor people get to work then?

M : Just like before: they could take the bus or subway.

F : Not to mention the massive unemployment that would result among auto workers, gasoline attendants, mechanics, construction workers, insurance salespeople.....

- M** : Well, they'd find other jobs. Just like when typewriters became *obsolete*; now people work in computer companies instead.
- F** : I don't think people would like to have their status symbols taken away from them by such a law. If the government made any serious attempt to *deprive* them of their cars, that government wouldn't last long.
- M** : Maybe you're right, after all.
- F** : Hey, I think we're moving! The *traffic jam* seems to have cleared suddenly.
- M** : Well, at least talking about the traffic problem let us pass the time pleasantly while we were stuck in traffic, even though we didn't solve the problem itself.



- **obsolete** : no longer in use or in fashion

- **deprive (sb) of (sth)** : take (sth) from (sb)

- **traffic jam** : long line of vehicles that cannot move along the road, or that can only move very slowly