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Tok Ples proficiency among UPNG students: Survey 2026

About our research project

With rapid modern changes and urbanization, many of our ancestral languages are at risk of being lost forever. It is now up to our generation to keep them alive - we must find effective ways of sustaining our linguistic heritage. This study attempts to understand and evaluate the current situation right here on UPNG campus.

The LML Cluster Research Team (SHSS UPNG) ran a quick survey to see how well UPNG students speak and understand their Tok Ples (or their grand/parents' language(s)).

This – first of its kind – survey was conducted in August 2026 with the help of the Registrar's Office, UPNG, who posted our survey questionnaire to the email list of all registered undergraduate students in the Waigani campus.

We used an anonymous Google Form questionnaire to collect data on:

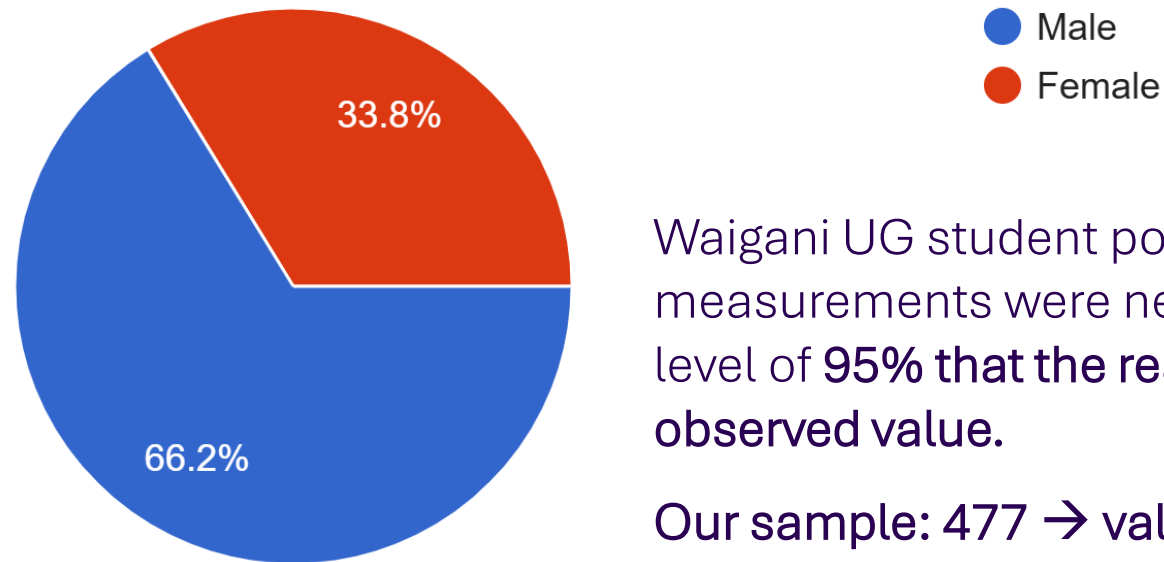
- Students' origin (POM / Small Town / Remote Village),
- Students' Tok Ples and their levels of proficiency in their Tok Ples language(s)
- Students' Home language,
- Their Age at Onset of English Acquisition (AOEA),
- Their Age at Literacy (AGELIT)
- Their Early Learning Language (ELL), and
- Whether they can read and write in their Tok Ples.

Though self-reported, this data can help us assess the current linguistic situation at UPNG and maybe suggest ways of saving our ancestral languages.

Today, we present our **preliminary findings** and **reflections** on addressing the challenges in keeping our ancestral languages in good health

Gender

477 responses



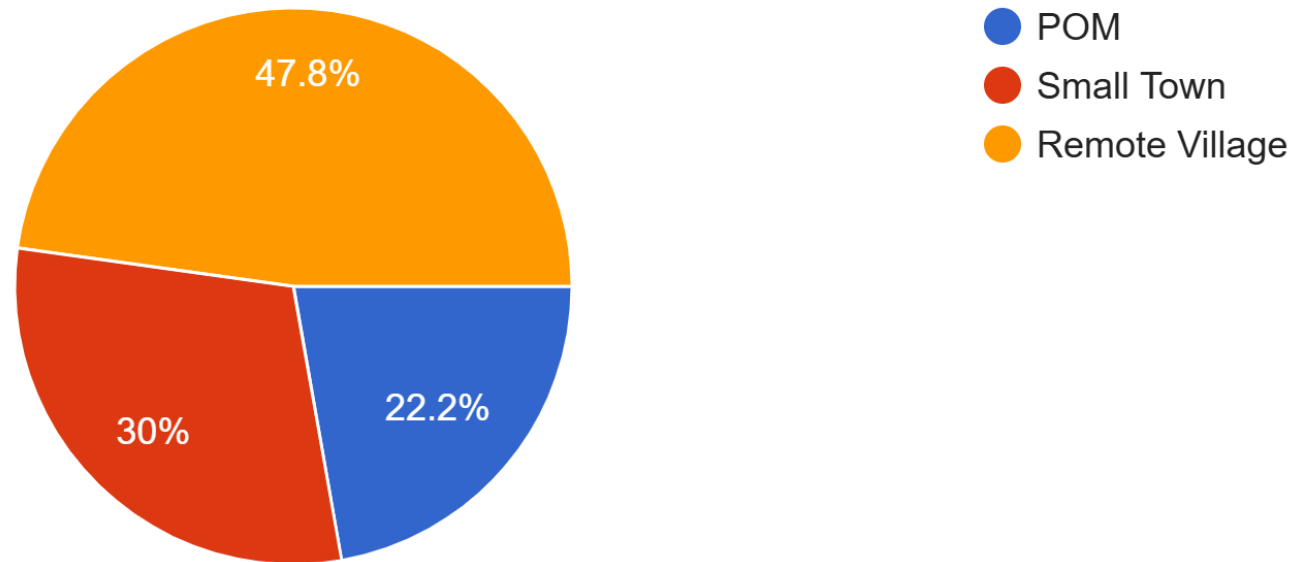
Waigani UG student population: 4500 → 355 or more measurements were needed to have a confidence level of 95% that the real value is within $\pm 5\%$ of the observed value.

Our sample: 477 → valid findings at 95% confidence level

Origin: an index of students' SES and likely Home Language

Origin: Where did you grow up?

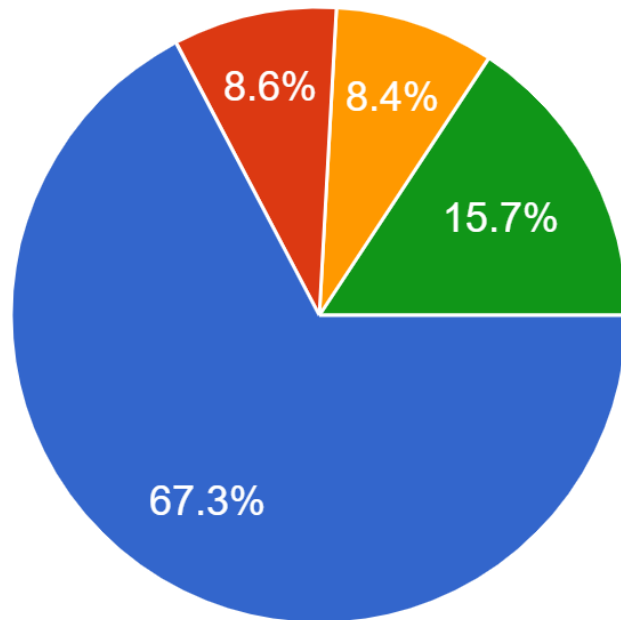
477 responses



Tok Ples languages represented on the UPNG Waigani campus: 261

Do you speak any of your parents' languages?

477 responses



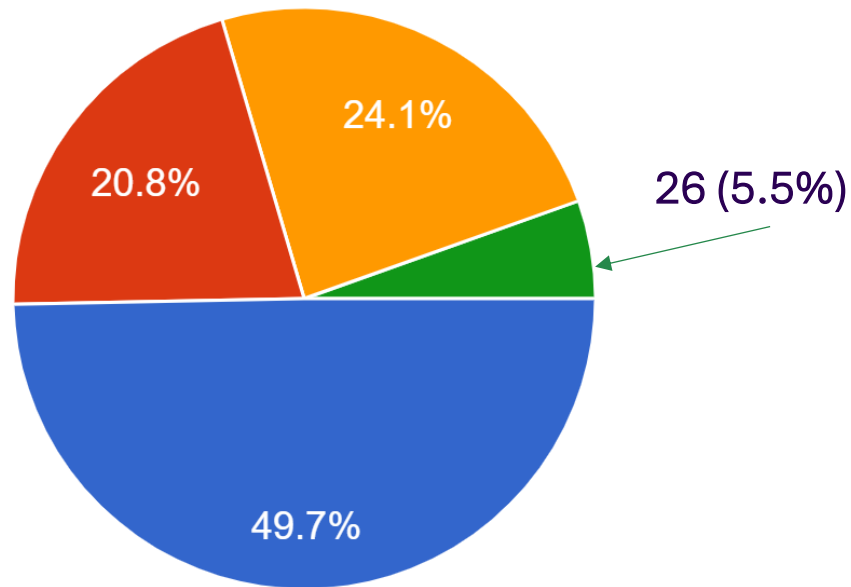
- Yes, I speak both of them
- Yes, but only my Mother's Tok Ples
- Yes, but only my Father's Tok Ples
- No, I do not speak their Tok Ples languages

N.B. Self-reported data

Self-reported Tok Ples proficiency levels

Your Tok Ples proficiency level:

477 responses



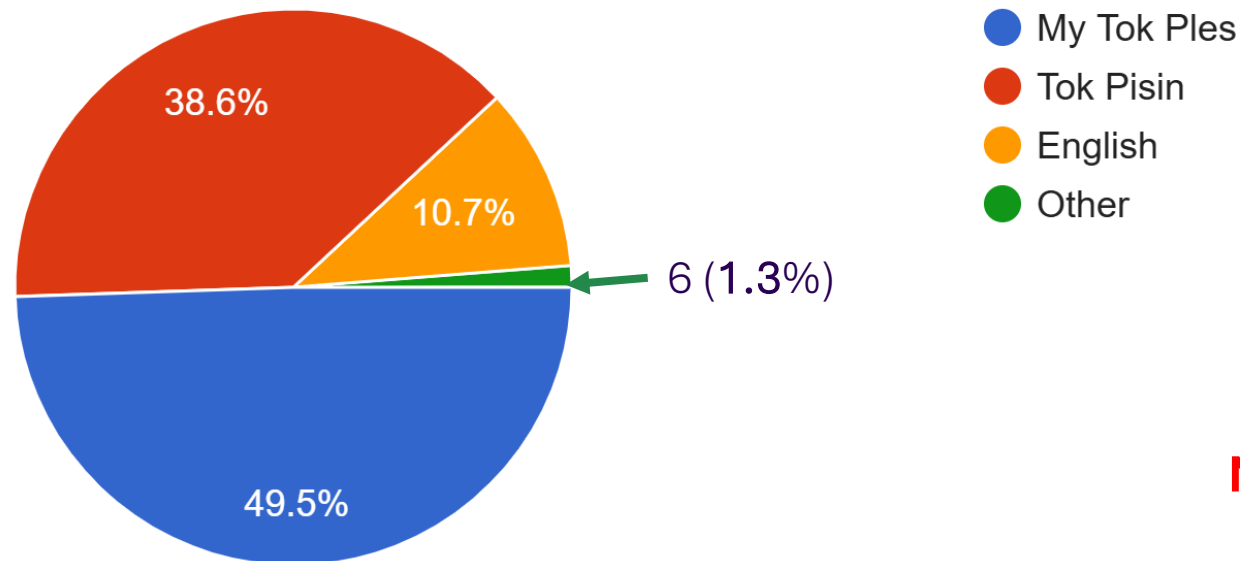
- High: I can speak my Tok Ples language(s) fluently and confidently
- Medium: I have basic speaking skills
- Low: I only understand when I hear it, and can use a few words
- None: I cannot speak any Tok Ples language, just English and Tok Pisin

N.B. Self-reported data

Tok Ples reported as home language in remote villages

Name of your First (Home) language?

477 responses

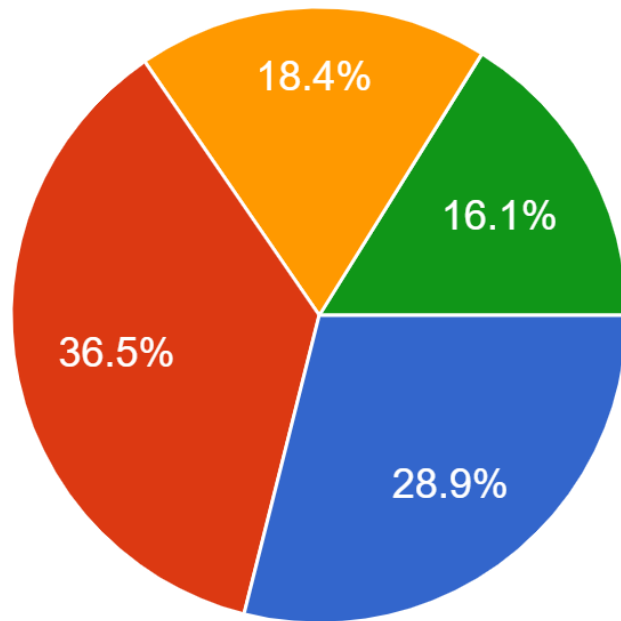


N.B. Self-reported data

AOEA

How old were you when you first started learning English?

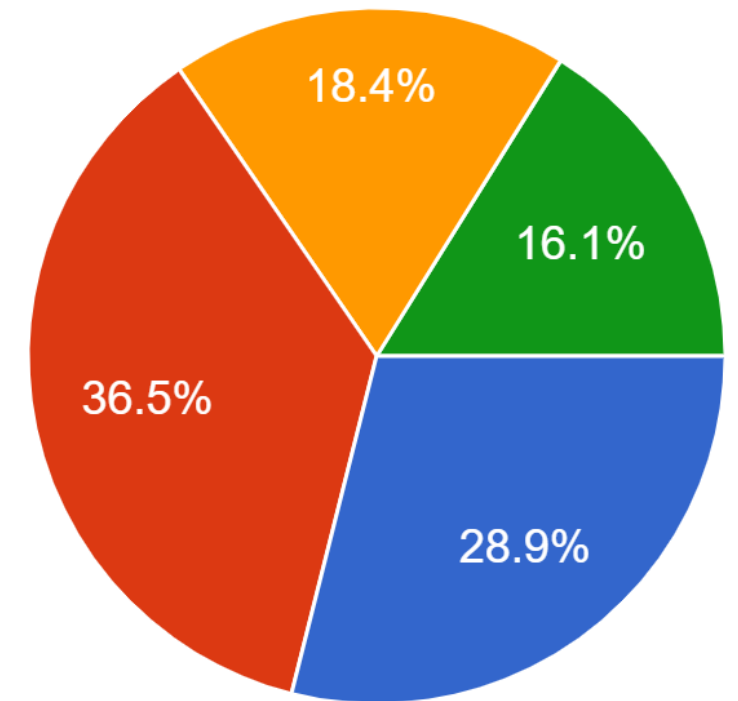
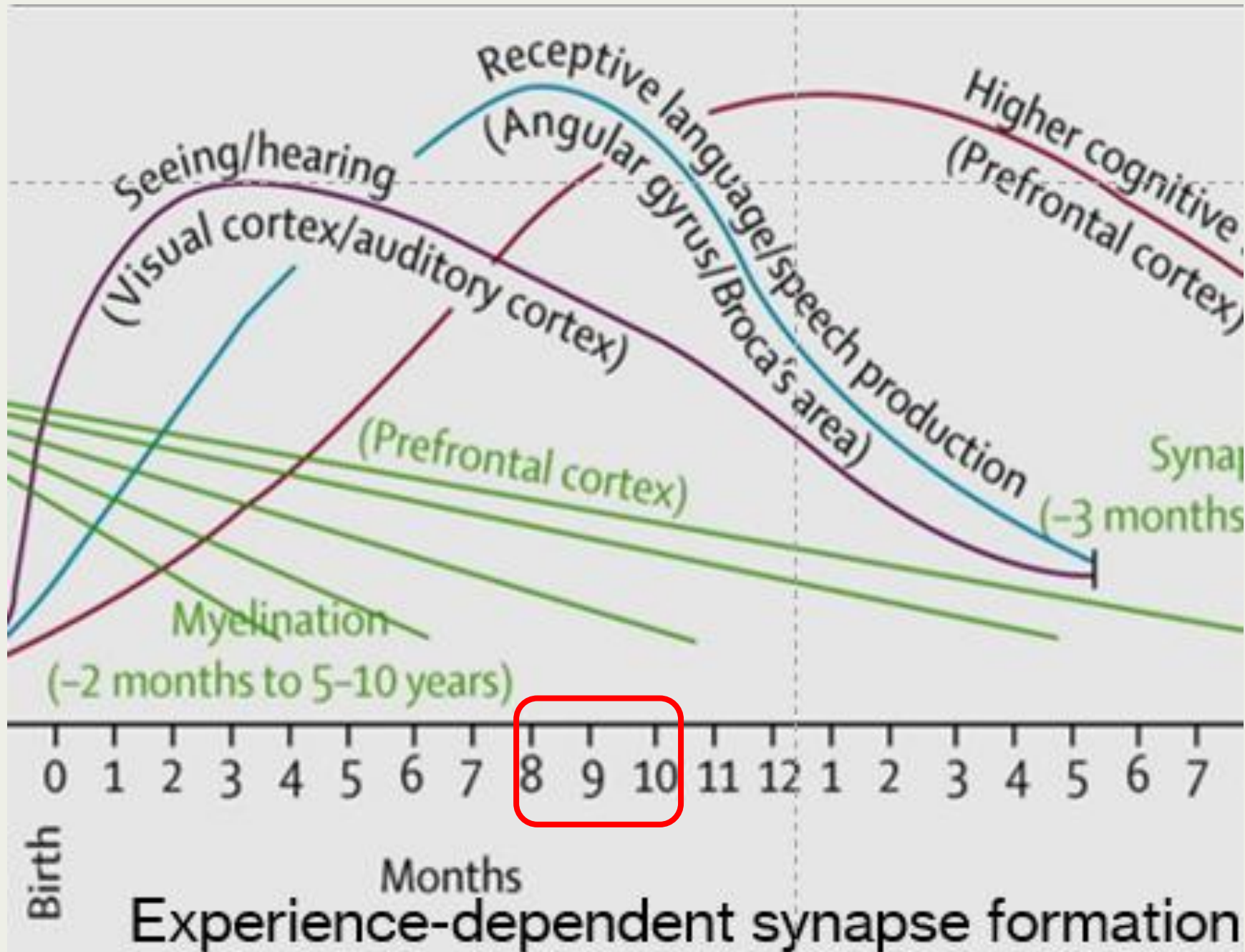
477 responses



- Before 5 years old
- 6-7 years old
- 8-9 years old
- 10 years old or older

N.B. Self-reported data

AOEA: Implications

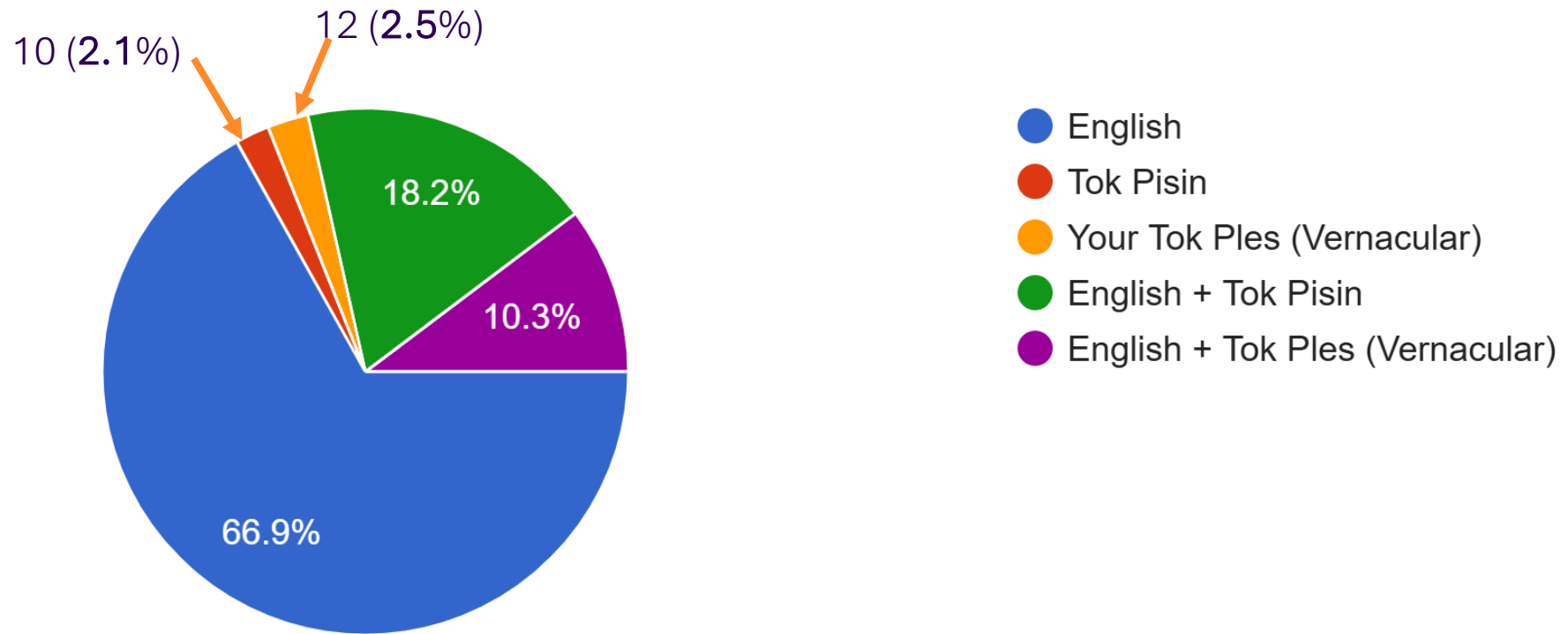


- Before 5 years old
- 6-7 years old
- 8-9 years old
- 10 years old or older

ELL English /English+TP / English+Vernacular = 95.4%/

In what language were you taught to read and write?

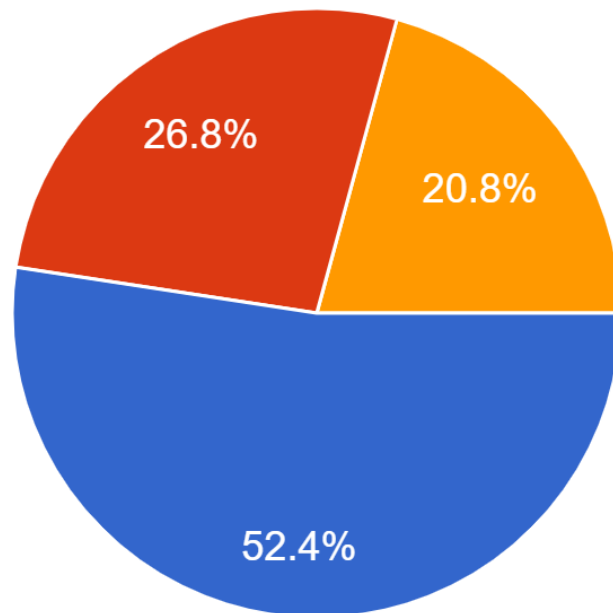
477 responses



Age @ Literacy

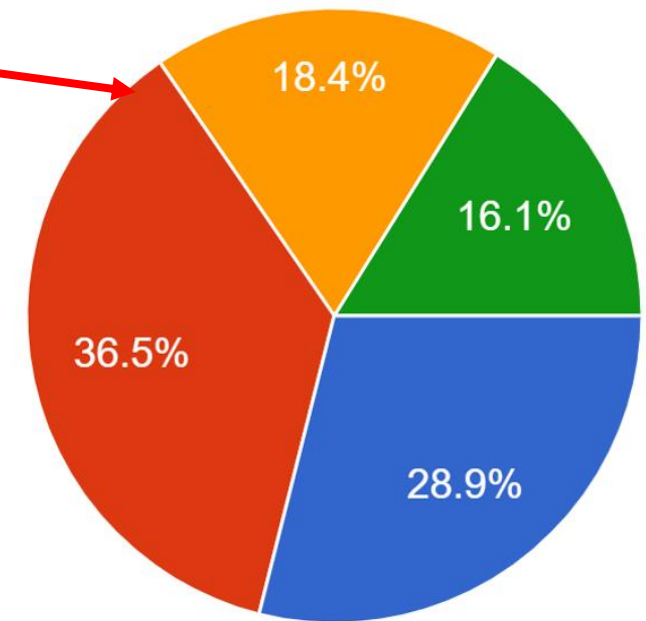
How old were you when you learned to read and write?

477 responses



AOEA

- Before 5 years old
- 6-7 years old
- 8-9 years old
- 10 years old or older

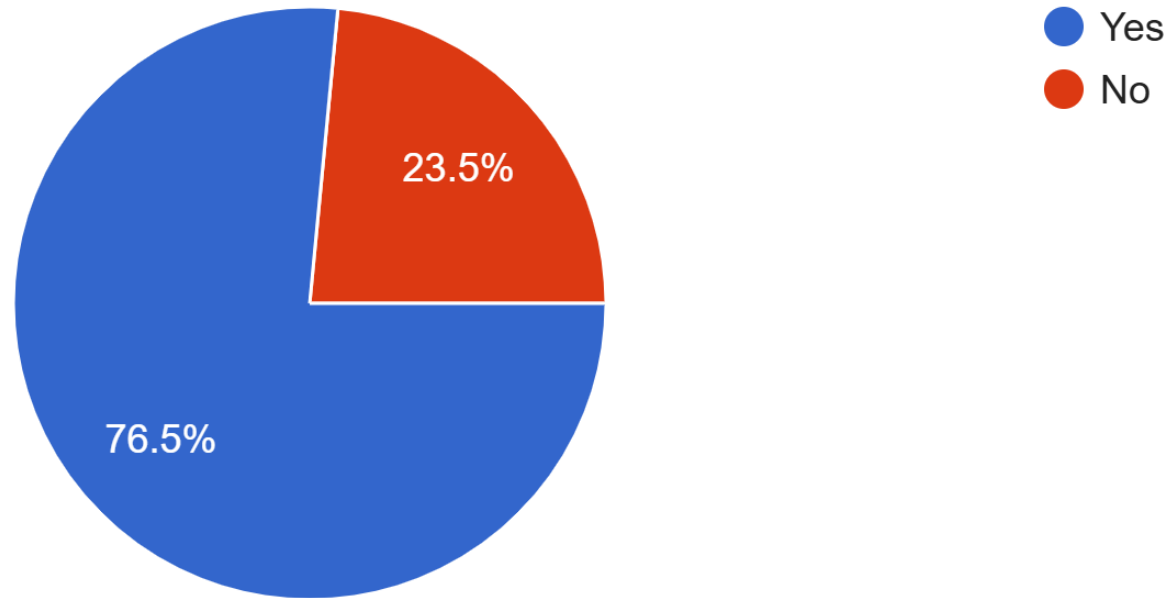


N.B. Self-reported data – inconsistent with reported AOE and ELL (95.4% English)

Literacy skills are transferrable, aren't they?

Can you read and write in your Tok Ples?

477 responses



Reflections

What do our data
show us?

Amazing linguistic diversity on Waigani Campus: Can we sustain it?

1. **How can we turn Native Tok Ples speakers into expert linguists? Things to consider:**
 - Bilingual (Tok Ples + English) ECE maximizes children's academic potential
 - BECE improves the general Quality of education in schools and universities, thus capturing the talent of rural kids, Native Speakers of our ancestral languages.
2. **Address the gap in Primary School curriculum: more focus needed on writing and reading comprehension**
3. **Invest in TEACHERS – the sculptors of the young minds – the Future of Papua New Guinea:**
 - Solve issues in Teacher training and remuneration
 - School infrastructure development



Our work continues...

We hope to publish the results of this survey in this year's volume of PNGJE