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Engl 497

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### Dialectal Differences in the Classroom

Roly poly versus the pill bug, highway versus freeway, lightning bug versus firefly; both words in each example means the exact same thing but can be confusing when teaching English as a second language. Imagine a young child initially learning English in California but then moves to Ohio; they'll be completely lost. These differing words can even confuse native English speakers. For children who are native speakers and those learning English as a second language, I propose that teachers introduce their students to all words relating to the same concept.

First, it's important to differentiate between language, accent, and dialect, as they are all often intermixed in meaning. Language is the most obvious, like French, English, Spanish, etc. People who speak different languages are unable to understand each other. Accents are a lot like dialects, as they are influenced by location, but they are usually referred to when a person's first language isn't English. For example, some may have a French accent or a British accent. Accent is just how people sound when speaking the same language.

Dialect is what I'm going to be focusing on today, which is a variety of a language usually based on location. The United States has a plethora of dialects such as Southern, Northern, Midwestern and many more! Dialects can even vary amongst states and cities like

a Texan, Bostonian, and New Yorker dialect. Even California has separate dialects just in this one state. Southern California and Northern California have dialects that appear rather similar but differ in certain word choice. For example, the Valley Girl dialect has been used increasingly more nowadays. This dialect was shown in many 2000's hit movies like Mean Girls and Clueless. With this dialect, the words "like" and "hella" are used quite frequently. Valley Girl dialect is spoken with a rising intonation at the end, much like a question, called a high-rise. When it comes to specific words (discussed in the survey later on) Northern and Southern California have different ways of referring to freeways/highways. Northern Californians will take "101" to reach their destination while Southern Californians will take "the 101." Both mean the same thing, but have different ways of saying it. You can even have different dialects when it comes to race as well. For example there's African American Vernacular English which has the omission of the verb "to be." This dialect would say "I tell him to be quiet because he don't know what he \_\_\_ talking about" instead of he doesn't know what he is talking about. Dialects are incredibly interesting and should be thoroughly considered when teaching English as a second language.

The article by Godley and several others called "Preparing Teachers for Dialectally Diverse Classrooms" analyzes how teachers can combat social and educational inequities when it comes to dialectal differences. Drawing from the last dialect discussed, the authors analyze how African American Vernacular English is perceived in an academic setting. Teachers often express prejudicial social attitudes with comments on students who speak African American Vernacular English such as "Rajid can't do challenging work--just listen to the way he talks," and pedagogical responses such as repeatedly interrupting a student during

oral reading to correct "missing" word endings or "improper" grammar" (Godley 30).

Educators must refrain from judging these stigmatized dialects and instead perceive it as a dialectal variety that shouldn't be discriminated upon. The tough part of this perspective, is that Standard American English and Academic English are commonly the societal norms when it comes to educational purposes. This prejudice needs to be fixed throughout the entire educational system, but it can start with teachers who do not discriminate against different dialects.

When it comes to teaching English as a second language, the acceptance of different dialects becomes an even bigger issue. Say for example, that a student is originally taught in a school district where African American Vernacular English is accepted and commonly used amongst teachers and peers but later moves to a school district where that is not the case. This student will be perceived as incapable of speaking English even when they have just learned a different variety. This student is disadvantaged at the start, as English is not their first language, but even when they have learned African American Vernacular English, they will still be perceived as incapable of speaking "proper" English. To fix this issue, we need to reform our standards, and accept that all varieties and dialects of English are correct.

Godley's article proposes a solution to this problem by requiring educators to take a linguistics class to expand their view on what acceptable English is. These authors include statistics to support their theory stating "language informs every aspect of the teaching-learning dynamic, yet nearly one third of members of the leading language arts professional organizations have never taken a course on language diversity or linguistics" (Godley 31). This is absolutely absurd. Teachers educate our future leaders, doctors, lawyers,

yet they are not required themselves to be educated on sociolinguistics? The first step we need to take towards teachers accepting that all dialects and varieties of English are acceptable, is first requiring them to take a course that educates them on the subject.

John Barnitz elaborates on these ideas in an interesting article called “Linguistic Perspectives in Literacy Education.” He proposes that teachers acquire linguistic awareness in order to understand “which linguistic forms and functions should be allowed to develop naturally versus what features of language may need to be taught directly” (Barnitz 265). For example, skills like spelling and reading should be taught by the teacher, but when it comes to oral and writing skills, teachers should step back and allow students to use their personal dialect instead of enforcing Academic English.

Even when it comes to those learning English as a second language, teachers should accept that these students may pronounce things differently in accordance with the linguistic structure of their native language. Barnitz believes that “native languages and dialects have a significant place in learning English. Respecting and appreciating diverse language is a necessary first step in successful literacy instruction” (Barnitz 265). He really emphasizes how linguistic diversity instead of being seen as an obstacle, can be used as an asset for English acquisition. These dialectal differences need not impede on a student’s ability to learn but should be seen as a beneficial component to linguistic diversity.

Joan Morely expands on this by bringing pronunciation into the discussion. Her article “The Pronunciation in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages” questions “whether pronunciation should (or can) be taught and, if so, what should be taught and how; expressions of the need for more controlled studies of changes in learner pronunciation

patterns as the result of specific instructional procedures; views on whether and how research in second language phonology can inform classroom practices” (Morely 481). Most teachers seem to either teach pronunciation as articulatory phonetics or avoid touching the topic of pronunciation at all. Yet there must be more options besides these two.

With the steady increase of English as a second language learners from all different age ranges “there has been a shift from a narrow focus on linguistic competencies to a broader focus on communicative competence within which linguistic competencies (i.e., grammar, pronunciation, etc.) remain an essential component albeit only one of several critical competencies” (Morely 483). While teachers may strive to teach “proper” English to their students, now the primary focus is communicative competence. With this, students are taught to speak and understand English with less of an emphasis on “correctness.” This comes with the viewpoint that the English language is primarily learned for the communicative needs of its users.

Back in 1940 to 1960, pronunciation was the major focus in second language teaching as shown in the popular teaching practice called the Audiolingual Method. Students would listen to a series of phrases in a conversation, and practice saying the words like the audio tape did. The entire focus of this activity was on pronunciation, rather than on the student’s understanding of the words they were saying. They may not know the meaning of the word “store” but at least they know how to pronounce it like the audio did. This method is considerably ineffective when learning a second language, as the perfect pronunciation of a word does not equate to understanding of its meaning.

Beginning in the late 1960's all the way to the 1980's there was doubt on whether pronunciation was the most important factor of language to focus on and whether or not it could even be taught directly at all. The focus began to shift as the "means of teaching pronunciation no longer seemed appropriate as new pedagogic sights were set on language functions, communicative competencies, task-based methodologies, and realism and authenticity learning activities and materials" (Morley 485). Pronunciation of a language does not equal communicative competency, which is the goal of most second language learners.

When it comes to English, there can also be a variety of ways to pronounce words. In the survey conducted, different pronunciations of certain words were analyzed. With these pronunciations, there is no correct or incorrect way to say each words. Take for example the word "pecan", which can be pronounced "pee-KAHN", "pick-AHN" and "PEE-can." 53.8% pronounce it as "pee-KAHN", 24.7% say "pick-AHN", and 21.5% "PEE-can." All of these pronunciations are correct and would be understood by a native English speaker. How would words like this fit into educational focuses on pronunciation? And does pronunciation even matter? No matter how you pronounce pecan, all that really matters is that you understand the meaning of the word.

Another component that should be considered, is when one thing can have many different names. A roly poly and pill bug are the same creature, but have two different names depending on what region you're from. Same thing goes with lightning bug and firefly. What if a student who learned English as a second language is taught for a while in Ohio but then moves to California? They would originally be taught the correct word is

“lightning bug” but in California the word would be “firefly.” This can cause great confusion as neither word is incorrect but are perceived differently depending on what region you are in. Even native English speakers may have trouble understanding such a thing. A student in such a case may think that a lightning bug and firefly are two different bugs.

To resolve this issue, I propose that teachers teach both terms no matter what region they are located in. When looking up bug flashcards, California school label the bug as firefly while Ohio school’s flashcards would say lightning bug. Instead of just accepting one word now and dealing with the problem later, teachers should put both terms as the answer for the bug’s identification. If educators were to teach the different terms for the same concept then there would be less confusion later on, especially for second language learners who already have a term for the bug in their native language.

For example, a native Spanish speaker who is learning English already has the word “luciérnaga” for the bug and must learn the term in English as well. They should be exposed to the terms “firefly” and “lightning bug” incase they ever move to another region where a different word is used than what they were originally taught. The same goes for pronunciation. Students should be taught the different pronunciations of words like “caramel” so they are not limited to learn it the way the teacher says it. Likewise, if they already pronounce the word one way, they shouldn’t be taught that that way is wrong and there is a “correct” way.

The main step towards making all of these changes, is to start promoting acceptance of different dialects. This begins at the very top of the chain with teachers, who should be required to take a course on linguistics to learn about the importance of linguistic diversity

that they will see amongst their students. Next, school districts should prioritize communicative competence instead of pronunciation when it comes to learners of English as a second language. The pronunciation of words shouldn't matter as much as the understanding of the word and the ability to use it and understand it in a conversation. Lastly, students at the early stages of English language acquisition should be taught the different terms for the same word. Firefly and lightning bug should both be taught to prevent confusion in the future.

Overall, these changes would be beneficial for both native English speakers and learners of English as a second language. As seen in the survey, a student who lives in one region and moves to another may have confusion in the change of any of these aspects. People in California, Ohio, Washington, Pennsylvania and so many other regions use different words that correlate to the term primarily used where they are located. These changes are difficult for native English speaker but if you take someone who learned English as a second language, these changes could lower their confidence in acquiring the language if the pronunciation, term, or dialect changes. To help our students who come from a variety of backgrounds, these changes ought to be implemented for an easier acquisition of English and less complications in the future.

## Works Cited

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Morley, J. (1991). The Pronunciation Component in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3), 481–520. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586981>

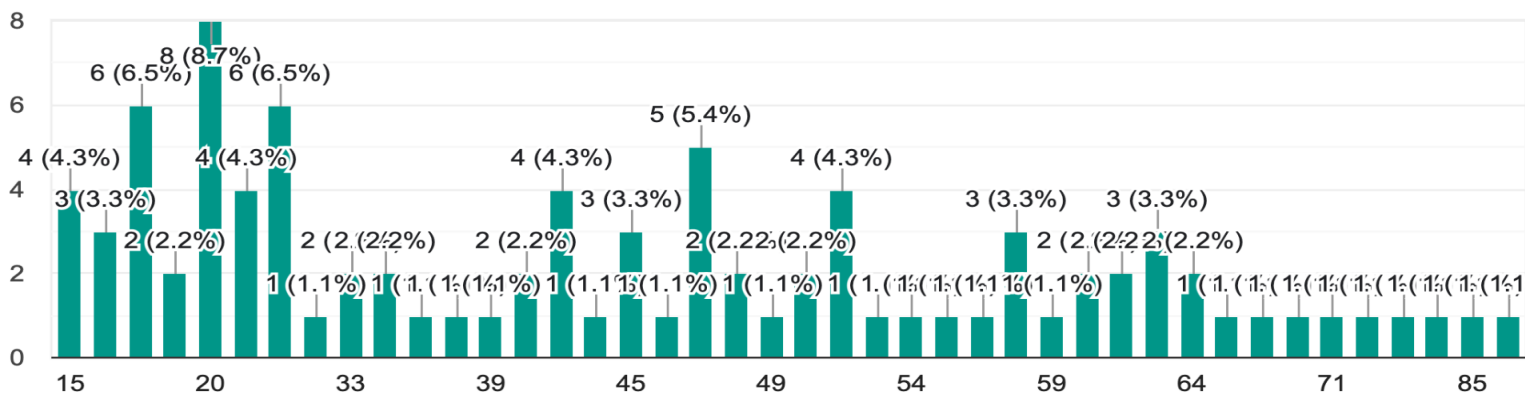
## Google Forms

(93 Responses)

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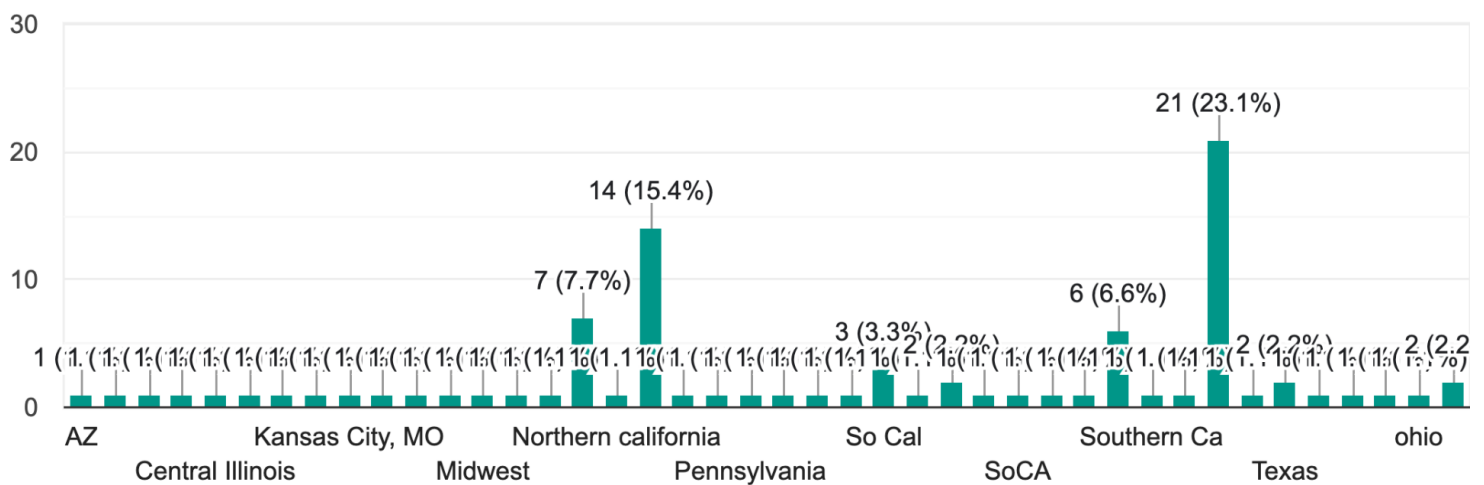
## What is your age?

92 responses



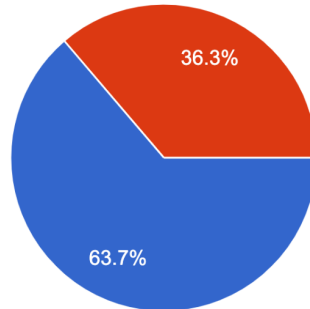
## Where are you from? (If California then southern or northern?)

91 responses



What is this?

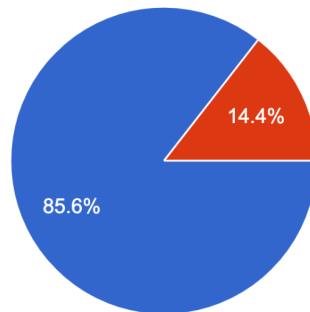
91 responses



● firefly  
● lightning bug

What is this?

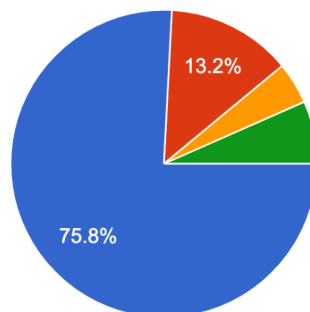
90 responses



● roly poly  
● pill bug

What would you say?

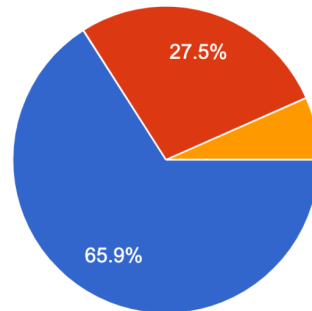
91 responses



● soda  
● pop  
● coke  
● soft drink

### What would you say?

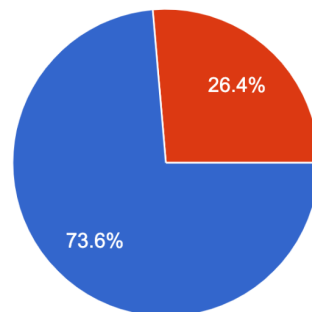
91 responses



- you guys
- y'all
- you all

### How would you say this?

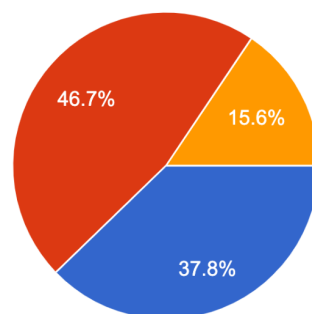
91 responses



- We should take the 101 to our destination
- We should take 101 to our destination

### How do you say mayonnaise?

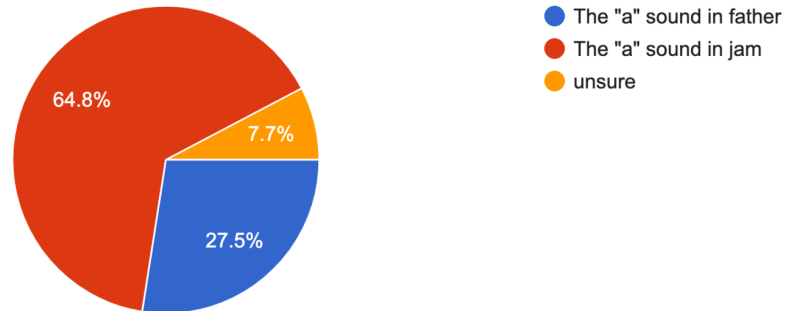
90 responses



- may-uh-naze
- man-aze
- interchangeably

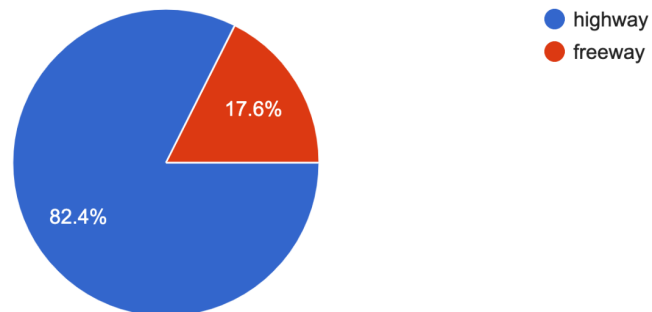
How would you pronounce pajamas?

91 responses



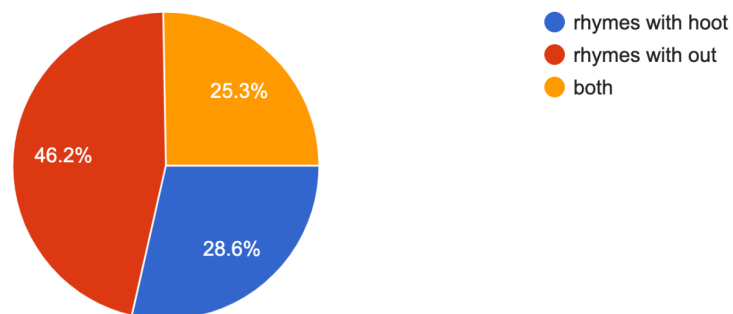
What is this?

91 responses



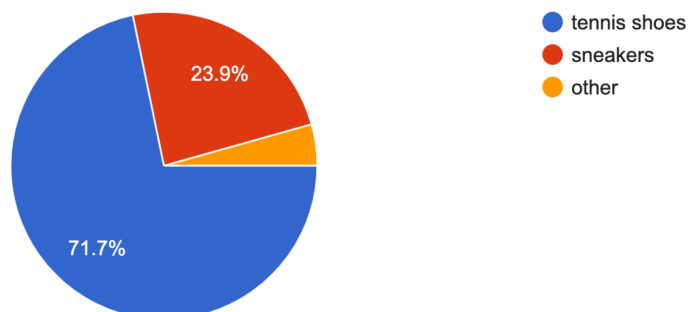
How would you pronounce route?

91 responses



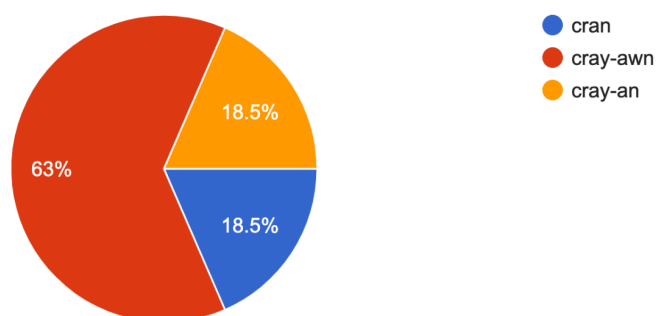
### What are these?

92 responses



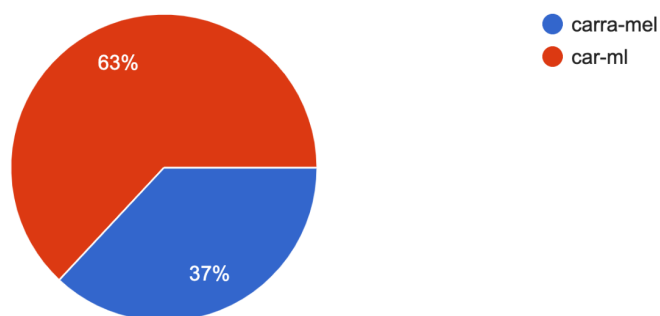
### How do you pronounce this?

92 responses



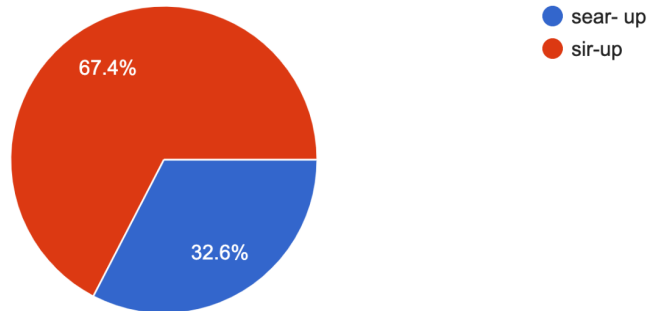
### How do you pronounce this?

92 responses



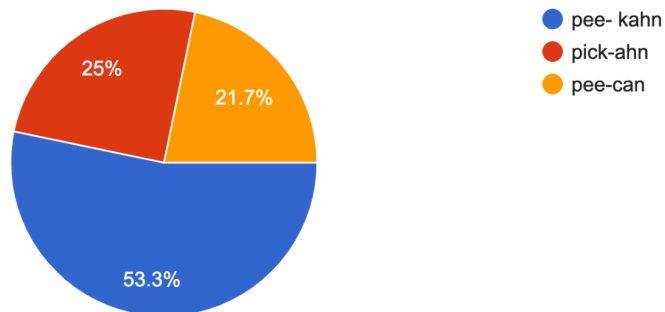
How do you pronounce this?

92 responses



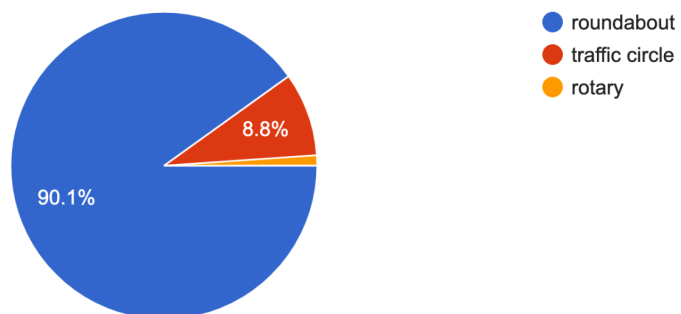
How do you pronounce this?

92 responses



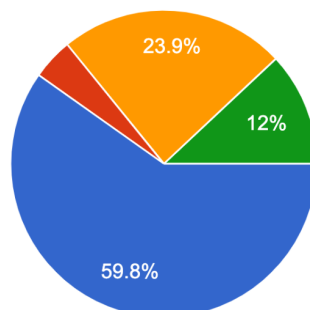
What is this?

91 responses



### What is this?

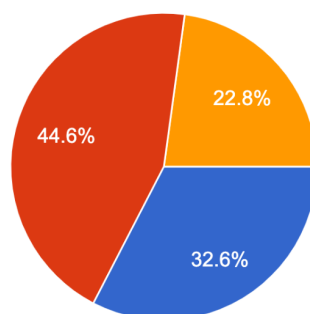
92 responses



- frosting
- icing
- they are the same thing
- they are different consistencies

### What are these?

92 responses



- suckers
- lollipops
- both