

WHAT LANGUAGES DO ENGLISH LEARNERS SPEAK?

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National Clearinghouse for
English Language Acquisition and
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The most recently released tabulations—from the 2000 US Census—list 325 distinct languages spoken in homes across the United States. The most commonly spoken language by English learner students is Spanish, but states list a total of 56 different languages when listing the most commonly spoken languages in each state.

The most recent (2000) Census listed 325 languages spoken in homes across the United States ranging from Africaans to Zuni, and from languages with very few speakers to languages with several million speakers. The Census Bureau keeps detailed annual statistics on a subset of these languages (Shin & Kominisky, 2010).

States report data on the home languages of English learner students (ELs) to the US Department of Education in their Consolidated State Performance Reports. States report the five home languages most commonly spoken by ELs. In interpreting these data, it is critical to be aware that speakers of languages which do not fall into the five reported languages in a state are not counted or identified. Thus counts of speakers for all languages—except for Spanish, which is reported by every state—are likely to be undercounts. Languages with small numbers of speakers may not be reported at all. Additionally, states report languages using the ISO 639-2 list, which identifies names for only 545 languages (Library of Congress, 2010).¹

Spanish is the most-spoken home language for English learner students in 44 states and the District of Columbia. There are also large numbers of ELs who speak Vietnamese, Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages), Arabic, and Hmong. A total of 56 distinct languages were reported by states as one of the top five languages spoken by EL students in that state. The U.S. Census Bureau (2004) lists 325 distinct languages spoken in homes across the United States.

Ten Home Languages Most Frequently Reported by English Learners, 2009–10

Language	Number of ELs
Spanish	3,582,884
Vietnamese	85,252
Chinese*	69,821
Arabic	51,606
Hmong	46,311
Haitian	33,845
Tagalog	26,885
Somali	19,699
Navajo	10,507

* As ISO 639-2 was originally intended to list written languages, it does not distinguish between Chinese languages which are mutually intelligible when written but not when spoken. The longer ISO 639-3 list does however make a distinction.

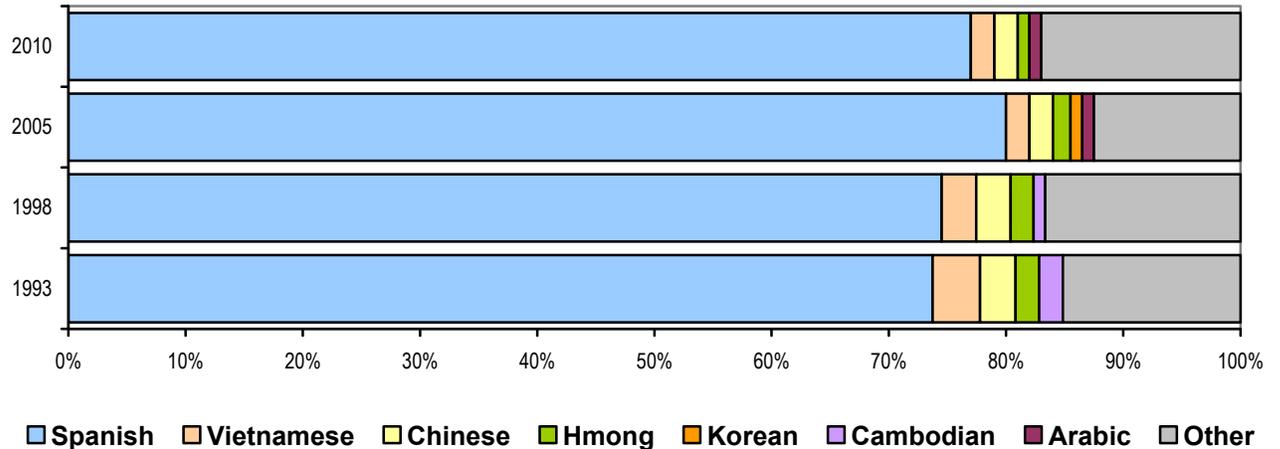
States vary in their linguistic homogeneity. In 14 states, Spanish-speakers constitute more than 80% of all EL students. There are 11 states in which Spanish speakers do not make up the majority of English learner students. Of these 11 relatively heterogeneous states, four are states in which Spanish speakers are more numerous than speakers of any other language even though they are not a majority. In seven states, Spanish is not the most commonly spoken language of EL students. These states (and their most frequently reported languages) are Alaska (Yup'ik), Hawai'i (Iloko—also known as Ilocano), Maine (Somali), Montana (Blackfeet) North Dakota (Ojibwa), South Dakota (Siouan languages), and Vermont (Maay).

¹ Linguists estimate that there are currently approximately 6,000 languages spoken worldwide (Lewis, 2009).



Comparisons of the home languages of EL students over the past seventeen years reveal that Spanish has remained the majority language of ELs, with slight fluctuations in the proportion of Spanish-speakers. Over the seventeen-year period, the proportions of speakers of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian have declined.

Home Languages of EL Students, 1993–2010



Note: We recognize that the largest language of Cambodia is Khmer (Lewis 2009); however, the reports from which these data are taken report on "Cambodian," and not on Khmer, Lao, or other languages found in the region. Language data were collected from states in 1993, 1998, and then yearly from 2002 onward.

References

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Data Sources

Data for school year 2009–10 from the Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPRs) submitted by states to the US Department of Education. CSPRs for each state are available via <http://www.ncele.gwu.edu/t3sis>

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