



Office of English Language Acquisition

The Top Languages Spoken by English Learners in the United States

States annually report the five languages other than English most commonly spoken by English learners (ELs) as well as the number of ELs who speak each of the “top five” languages. This fact sheet gives an overview of the most commonly spoken languages during the 2019–20 school year (SY). Fifty languages or language categories appear in one or more states’ top-five lists.¹ The numbers of speakers reported include only those who speak the language in a state where that language is among the top five. This fact sheet does not include all of the ELs across the nation who speak the particular language.

The Top 20 Languages on States’ “Top Five” Lists of Languages Spoken by K–12 ELs: School Year 2019–20

Ranking	States’ Top 5 Languages: SY 2019–20	Number of Speakers Reported ^{a/}	Percent of Total U.S. EL Students ^{b/}
1	Spanish; Castilian	3,872,159	75.69%
2	Arabic	124,410	2.43%
3	Chinese	87,256	1.71%
4	Vietnamese	57,073	1.12%
5	Portuguese	32,017	0.63%
6	Haitian; Haitian Creole	25,404	0.50%
7	Hmong	19,623	0.38%
8	Cushitic (Other)	16,829	0.33%
9	Tagalog	15,787	0.31%
10	Russian	13,905	0.27%
11	Somali	12,600	0.25%
12	Urdu	11,090	0.22%
13	Bengali	9,291	0.18%
14	Swahili	8,327	0.16%
15	Navajo; Navaho	7,235	0.14%
16	Karen Languages	6,455	0.13%
17	Polish	6,080	0.12%
18	Marshallese	5,926	0.12%
19	Yupik Languages	5,179	0.10%
20	Amharic	5,133	0.10%

a/ The total number of ELs reported in Grades K–12 for SY 2019–20 was 5,115,887.

b/ Author calculation. Percent = Total number of state-reported speakers of top five languages divided by the total number of ELs in Grades K–12, multiplied by 100. The percent of total U.S. EL students does not necessarily represent the portion of all ELs in U.S. schools who speak a language, only those in states where the language is in the top five.

During SY 2019–20, approximately 76% of all ELs spoke Spanish. Spanish was on all states’ “top five” lists and was the most commonly spoken language of ELs in 45 states and the District of Columbia. There were five states where Spanish was not the most common language for ELs. Alaska, Minnesota, Vermont, Hawaii, and Montana had other languages as the most common languages spoken by ELs. Two of these languages are in the top 20 languages spoken by ELs nationwide. In Alaska, the largest percentage (17%) of ELs spoke Yupik languages. Somali was the most common language reported in Minnesota, spoken by 12% of ELs.

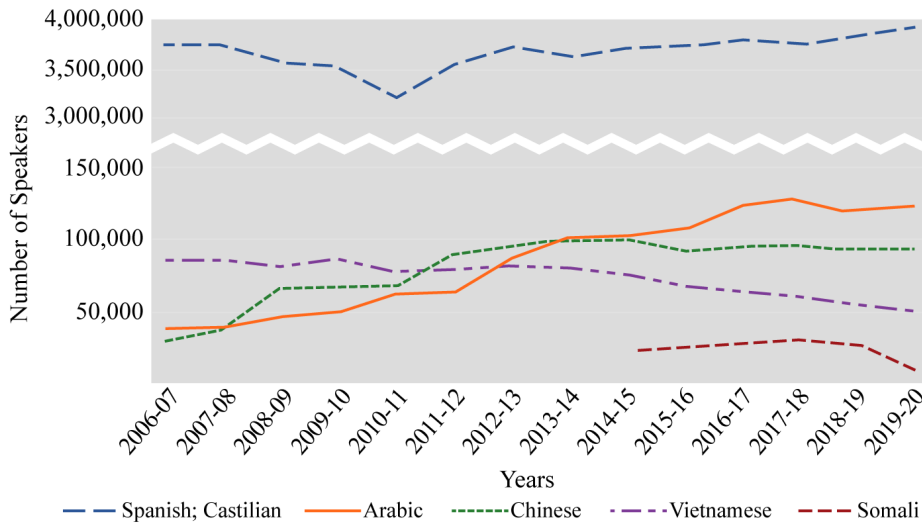
Five States With Languages Other than Spanish as the Most Common Languages for English Learners: School Year 2019–20



NOTE: State education agencies report the top five languages and the number of all ELs, not just ELs receiving Title III services, speaking each of the top five languages.

¹ Language categories, or language families, are groups of languages that exhibit linguistic similarities, often due to geographic region. The Library of Congress is the registration authority for the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 639-5 standards, a set of codes that represent languages and language families. For more information, see <https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-5/id.php>

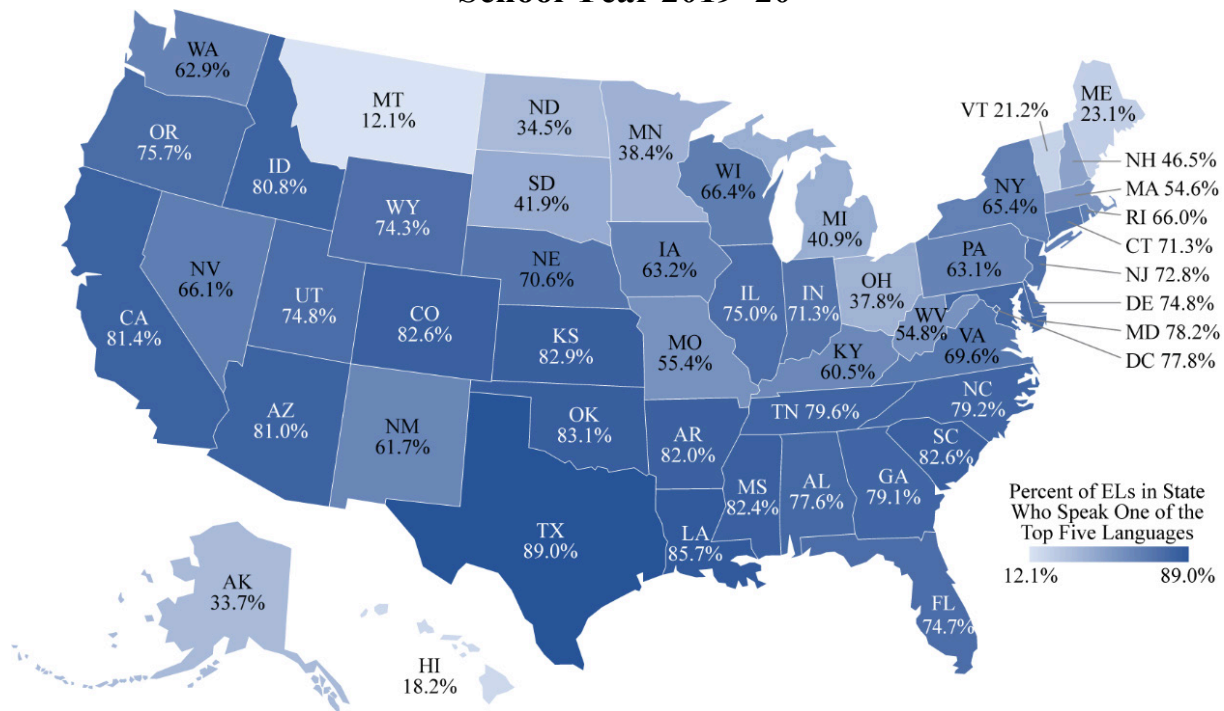
Trends of the Five Most Common Languages: School Years 2006–07 to 2019–20



Since SY 2006–07, three out of the five most common EL languages experienced an increase in speakers. After Spanish, which grew by more than 130,000 speakers since SY 2006–07, Arabic experienced the largest and the steadiest increase, rising from less than 40,000 speakers in SY 2006–07 to almost 125,000 speakers in SY 2019–20. Somali (which rose to the status of the five most common languages in SY 2014–15), along with Vietnamese, experienced a decline by SY 2019–20, decreasing from 25,371 to 12,600 and from 85,683 to 57,073 speakers, respectively.

NOTE: Somali was not a top five language prior to SY 2014–15. During SYs 2012–13 and 2013–14, Haitian Creole was the fifth most common language in states' top five lists. From SY 2006–07 to SY 2011–12, Hmong was among the top five languages reported by states. Even though Portuguese was a top five language in SY 2019–20, this was its first year in that group, therefore it is not included in the graph above.

Percentage of English Learners Who Are Speakers of the Top Five Languages by State: School Year 2019–20



The concentration of ELs who were speakers of the states' five most common languages varied widely in SY 2019–20, ranging from just over 12% in Montana to almost 90% in Texas. The state with the second largest concentration of ELs who spoke the top five most common languages was Louisiana, with almost 86%, and the state with the second smallest concentration was Vermont, with just over 21%. In the two states with the smallest concentrations of ELs who spoke one of the top five languages, Spanish was not the most common language spoken by ELs, while in the two states with the largest concentration it was.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR): Part I: SY 2019-20.
 U.S. Department of Education. (2020). *The biennial report to Congress on the implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program: School Years 2014–2016*.
<https://nclia.ed.gov/files/uploads/3/20210219-NCELABiennialReport-508.pdf>