

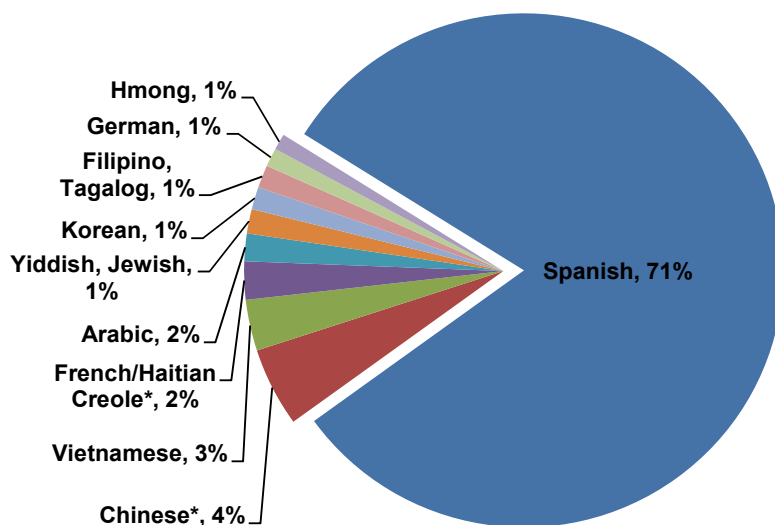
Top Languages Spoken by English Language Learners Nationally and by State

This fact sheet describes the home languages spoken by English Language Learner (ELL) students at national and state levels. For the top ten languages spoken by ELL students at the national level (Section I) the fact sheet draws upon the most recently available data, from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2013 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS asks respondents to identify the level of English proficiency of every member of a household. Meanwhile, states and school districts use separate methods to identify students as ELLs, including home language surveys and English language proficiency assessments.¹ For state level analysis (Sections II – V) data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR) SY 2012-13 are utilized to describe the top five languages² spoken by ELL students enrolled in public schools in each state.

I. Spanish Was the Language Most Often Spoken by ELLs Nationwide

While the languages spoken by ELL students were very diverse, Spanish was the most common home or first language, spoken by 71 percent of ELL students, according to the 2013 ACS.³

Figure 1. Top Ten Languages Spoken in ELL Students’ Homes, 2013



Note: English Language Learners (ELL) students were identified as individuals ages 5 to 18 enrolled in school who reported speaking English less than “very well.” Chinese includes Cantonese and Mandarin. French/Haitian Creole includes French, as well as French or Haitian Creole.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis based on 2013 American Community Survey (ACS).

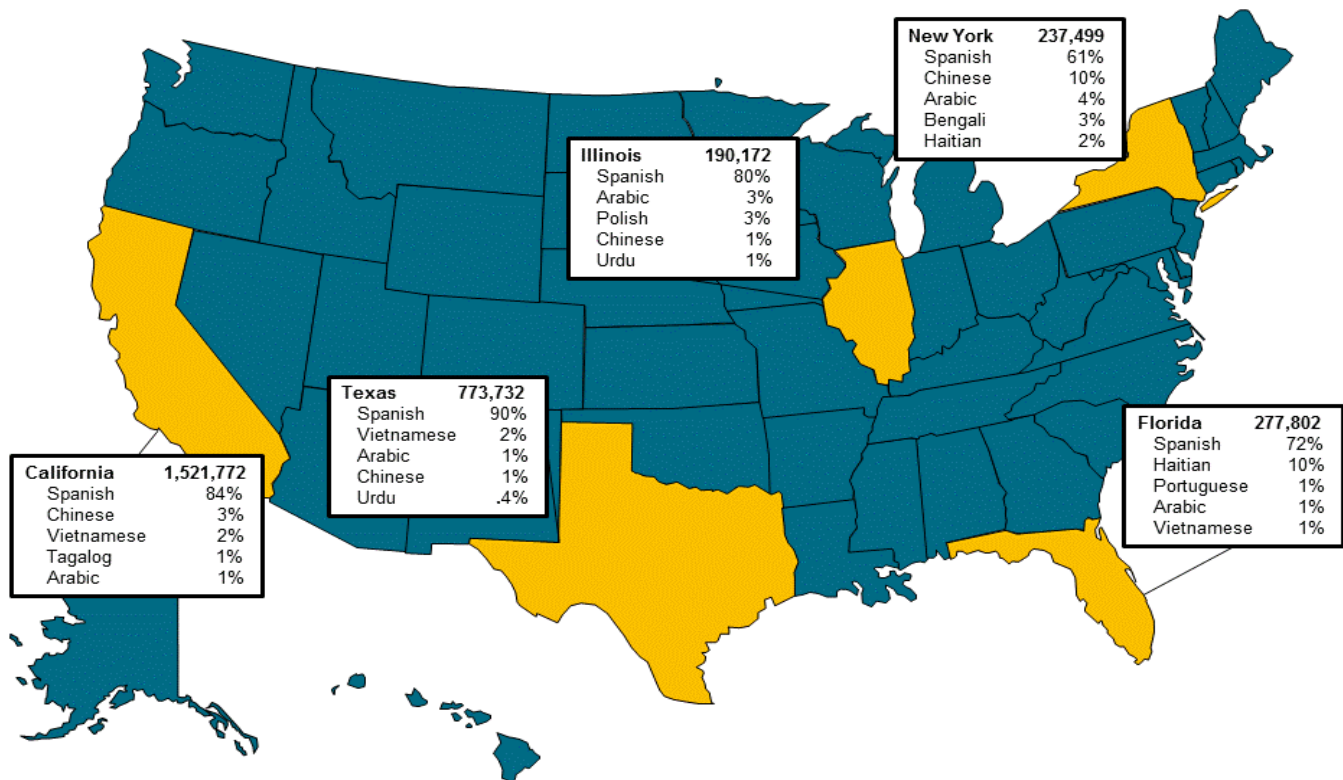
Chinese was the second most common language spoken in ELL students’ homes, representing 4 percent of ELLs, followed by Vietnamese (3 percent) and French/Haitian Creole (2 percent). Of the remaining top ten languages, no other language accounted for more

than 2 percent of the total. Notably five of the top ten—Chinese, Arabic, Yiddish, Korean, Hmong—are not based on the Latin alphabet.

II. Top Five Languages Spoken in States with the Largest ELL Student Populations

Five states—California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois—accounted for 62 percent of the ELL students enrolled in the nation’s K-12 public schools in the 2012-13 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education.⁴ These traditional immigrant destination states have long attracted the foreign born from many countries. Though Spanish was the language most commonly spoken by ELL students in all of these states, differences in other top languages reflect variations in immigrant and refugee settlement patterns. For example, 10 percent of ELL students in New York spoke Chinese, which is the same share that spoke Haitian in Florida. In Illinois, Polish was among the top five languages (see Map 1).

Map 1. Five States with Largest ELL Student Populations, SY 2012-13



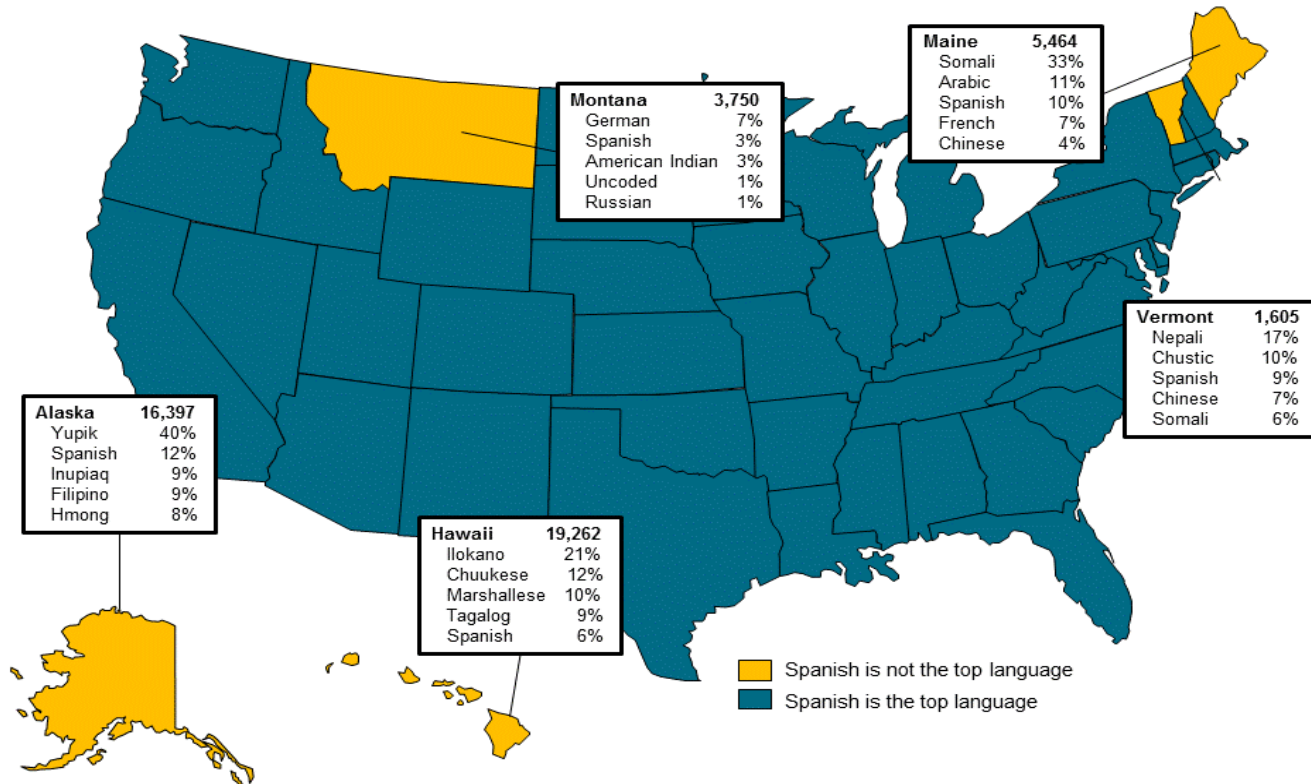
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Source: U.S. Department of Education, “SY 2012-13 Consolidated State Performance Reports,” accessed February 23, 2015, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy12-13part1/index.html. To download this map in high resolution, click [here](#).

III. Spanish Was Not the Top Language Spoken by ELLs in Every State

A language other than Spanish was the top language spoken by ELLs in five states: Alaska, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, and Vermont (see Map 2).

Map 2. States with Language Other than Spanish as Top Language Spoken by ELL Students, SY 2012-13



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Source: U.S Department of Education, “SY 2012-13 Consolidated State Performance Reports.”

To download this map in high resolution, click [here](#).

In two of these states, the ELL population was composed of speakers of indigenous languages, with Yupik the top language in Alaska and Ilokano in Hawaii. The other three states had relatively small populations of ELL students and their most common language varied. German was most common in Montana, Somali in Maine, and Nepali in Vermont.

IV. One Language Predominates in Many States

In 45 states and the District of Columbia more than two-thirds of ELL students spoke Spanish as their home language. Moreover, in 19 states and the District of Columbia, more than three-quarters of all ELL students spoke Spanish (see Table 1). Among these were two border states that have traditionally been home to large populations of Spanish-speaking immigrants—Texas and California—as well as several “new-destination” states in the Southeast: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

While the high frequency of one home language may give states opportunities for economies of scale in

providing education services to ELL students and in communicating with their parents, it could also complicate the development of effective services for those speaking less common languages.

Table 1. States With More Than Three-Quarters of ELLs Speaking Spanish, SY 2012-13*

State	Language 1	Share of ELLs Speaking Language 1 (%)	Language 2	Language 3	Language 4	Language 5	Share of ELLs Speaking Top 5 Languages (%)
Texas	Spanish	90.5	Vietnamese	Arabic	Chinese	Urdu	94.0
Arkansas	Spanish	86.3	Marshallese	Vietnamese	Hmong	Arabic	94.8
Oklahoma	Spanish	84.8	Cherokee	Vietnamese	Hmong	Chinese	91.6
Colorado	Spanish	84.1	Vietnamese	Arabic	Chinese	Russian	89.3
California	Spanish	83.9	Chinese	Vietnamese	Tagalog	Arabic	91.3
North Carolina	Spanish	83.6	Arabic	Vietnamese	Chinese	Hmong	89.4
Mississippi	Spanish	82.0	Vietnamese	Arabic	Chinese	Gujarati	93.9
South Carolina	Spanish	81.2	Russian	Vietnamese	Chinese	Arabic	88.6
Kansas	Spanish	80.9	Undetermined*	Vietnamese	Chinese	Arabic	90.1
Illinois	Spanish	80.1	Arabic	Polish	Chinese	Urdu	88.3
Nevada	Spanish	79.5	Tagalog	Chinese	Vietnamese	Amharic	85.8
Utah	Spanish	78.9	Navajo	Somali	Arabic	Chinese	85.3
Georgia	Spanish	78.2	Not Applicable*	Vietnamese	Korean	Chinese	90.1
Indiana	Spanish	78.1	Burmese	German	Arabic	Chinese	88.4
Alabama	Spanish	77.2	Arabic	Korean	Vietnamese	Chinese	86.4
District of Columbia	Spanish	76.8	Amharic	French	Chinese	Vietnamese	87.3
Oregon	Spanish	76.6	Russian	Vietnamese	Chinese	Somali	86.0
Rhode Island	Spanish	76.4	Creole and Pidgin	Portuguese	Central Khmer	Chinese	88.3
Tennessee	Spanish	76.0	Arabic	Vietnamese	Somali	Kurdish	86.1
Delaware	Spanish	75.4	Creole and Pidgin	Chinese	Arabic	Afrikaans	85.9

* Sorted by highest share accounted for by the top spoken language.

Notes: According to the Kansas State Department of Education, the "undetermined" category represented ELL students who reported speaking "other" languages that may not be defined in the state's database definitions. In Georgia, "not applicable" category represents ELL students who spoke languages categorized as "Other African," "Other Asian," "Other Indian," "Other European." For more detail on each of the top five languages for all states, see online appendix: http://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/language_portal/ELLlanguageappendix2012-2013.xlsx.

Source: MPI analysis based on Department of Education, "SY 2012-13 Consolidated State Performance Reports," accessed February 23, 2015, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy12-13part1/index.html.

V. ELLs Were Linguistically Heterogeneous in a Number of States

In other states no particular language predominated and the ELL population was more evenly distributed across a number of languages. In 13 states less than half of ELLs spoke the top language (see Table 2). For example, only 7 percent of Montana's 3,750 ELL student population spoke German, the state's top language, while another 9 percent spoke the next four languages (Spanish, North American Indian, "uncoded languages,"⁵ and Russian). The remaining 84 percent spoke a wide variety of lower-incidence languages. In Michigan, 45 percent of the 80,958 ELL students spoke Spanish, but the other top languages—Arabic, Bengali, Albanian, and Vietnamese—represented different world regions and together accounted for 33 percent.

Table 2. States with Less than Half of ELLs Speaking the Top Language, SY 2012-13*

State	Language 1	Share of ELLs Speaking Language 1 (%)	Language 2	Language 3	Language 4
Montana	German	7.3	Spanish	North American Indian	Uncoded Languages*
Vermont	Nepali	16.5	Cushitic	Spanish	Chinese
Hawaii	Ilokano	20.9	Chuukese	Marshallese	Tagalog
South Dakota	Spanish	24.6	German	Karen	Siouan
North Dakota	Spanish	25.2	Nepali	Somali	Ojibwa
Ohio	Spanish	25.5	Somali	Arabic	Chinese
Maine	Somali	33.4	Arabic	Spanish	French
New Hampshire	Spanish	38.6	Nepali	Arabic	Chinese
Alaska	Yupik	40.0	Spanish	Inupiaq	Filipino
Minnesota	Spanish	40.6	Hmong	Somali	Karen
West Virginia	Spanish	41.8	Arabic	Chinese	Vietnamese
Michigan	Spanish	42.9	Arabic	Bengali	Albanian
Missouri	Spanish	49.5	Bosnian	Vietnamese	Arabic

* Sorted by lowest share accounted for by the top language.

Notes: According to the Montana Office of Public Instruction, languages categorized as “uncoded languages” were those not specified in the state’s list of home primary languages. “North American Indian” languages may include Montana, Blackfeet, Crow, Cheyenne, Cree, Dakota, Salish, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Kootenai. For more detail on each of the top five languages for all states, see online appendix: http://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/language_portal/ELLlanguageappendix2012-2013.xlsx.

Source: MPI analysis based on Department of Education, “SY 2012-13 Consolidated State Performance Reports.”

For more detailed data on the languages most commonly spoken by ELL students for the nation and by state click [here](#).

- 1 Students who are Limited English Proficient (LEP)—also known as English Language Learners (ELLs) or English Learners (EL)—have been defined by the U.S. Department of Education as children ages 3 through 21 who are enrolled or prepared to enroll in an elementary or secondary school and whose “difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English prevent them from achieving proficiency on state assessments, successfully achieving in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, and/or fully participating in society.” *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*: Section 9101 (25), www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg107.html. States are required to develop procedures to identify and assess English language proficiency of potential LEP/ ELL students.
- 2 Through the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR), the U.S. Department of Education only collects state-level data on the number of ELLs speaking each of the top five languages. It does not provide data on the top languages at the national level. The CSPR is the required annual reporting tool for each state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico as authorized under Section 9303 of the ESEA.
- 3 The Migration Policy Institute (MPI), in its analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), defines ELL students as individuals ages 5 to 18 who were enrolled in school and reported speaking English less than “very well.”
- 4 See Department of Education, SY 2012-2013 CSPR Part 1, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy12-13part1/index.html.
- 5 According to the Montana Office of Public Instruction, languages categorized as “uncoded languages” were those not specified in the state’s list of home primary languages. “North American Indian” languages may include Montana, Blackfeet, Crow, Cheyenne, Cree, Dakota, Salish, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Kootenai.

This Fact Sheet was written by Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Sarah Hooker, and Jeanne Batalova as part of the Migration Policy Institute's English Language Learner (ELL) Information Center Fact Sheet series. The ELL Information Center, a project of MPI's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, was launched in 2010 to provide a wide range of easily accessible national and state-level information to educators, policymakers, and others concerned with English Language Learners. The ELL Information Center can be found at www.migrationpolicy.org/ellinfo.

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