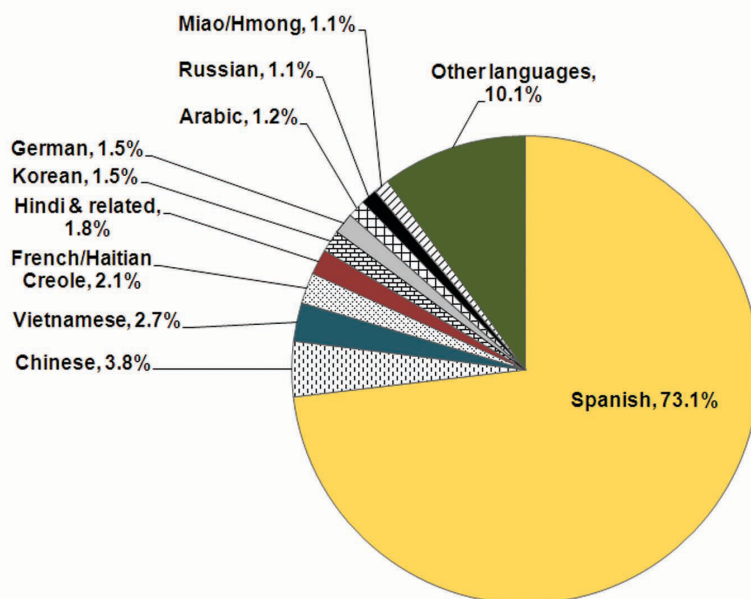


## Top Languages Spoken by English Language Learners Nationally and by State

### I. Spanish is the Language Most Often Spoken by English Language Learners (ELLs)

While ELL students around the nation speak more than 150 languages, Spanish is by far the most common home or first language, according to our analysis of the Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1. Top Ten Spoken Languages in ELL Students' Homes



Note: Refers to limited English proficient (LEP) students, ages 5 to 18, currently enrolled in school. LEP students are those who reported speaking English less than "very well."

Source: MPI analysis of the 2009 American Community Survey.

Second in frequency of use is Chinese, which is spoken by roughly 3.8 percent of ELLs, followed by Vietnamese (2.7 percent), and French/Haitian Creole (2.1 percent). Of the remaining top ten languages, no other language accounts for more than 2 percent of the total. Six of the top ten — Chinese, Korean, Hindi, Arabic, Russian, and Miao/Hmong — are not based on the Latin alphabet.<sup>2</sup>

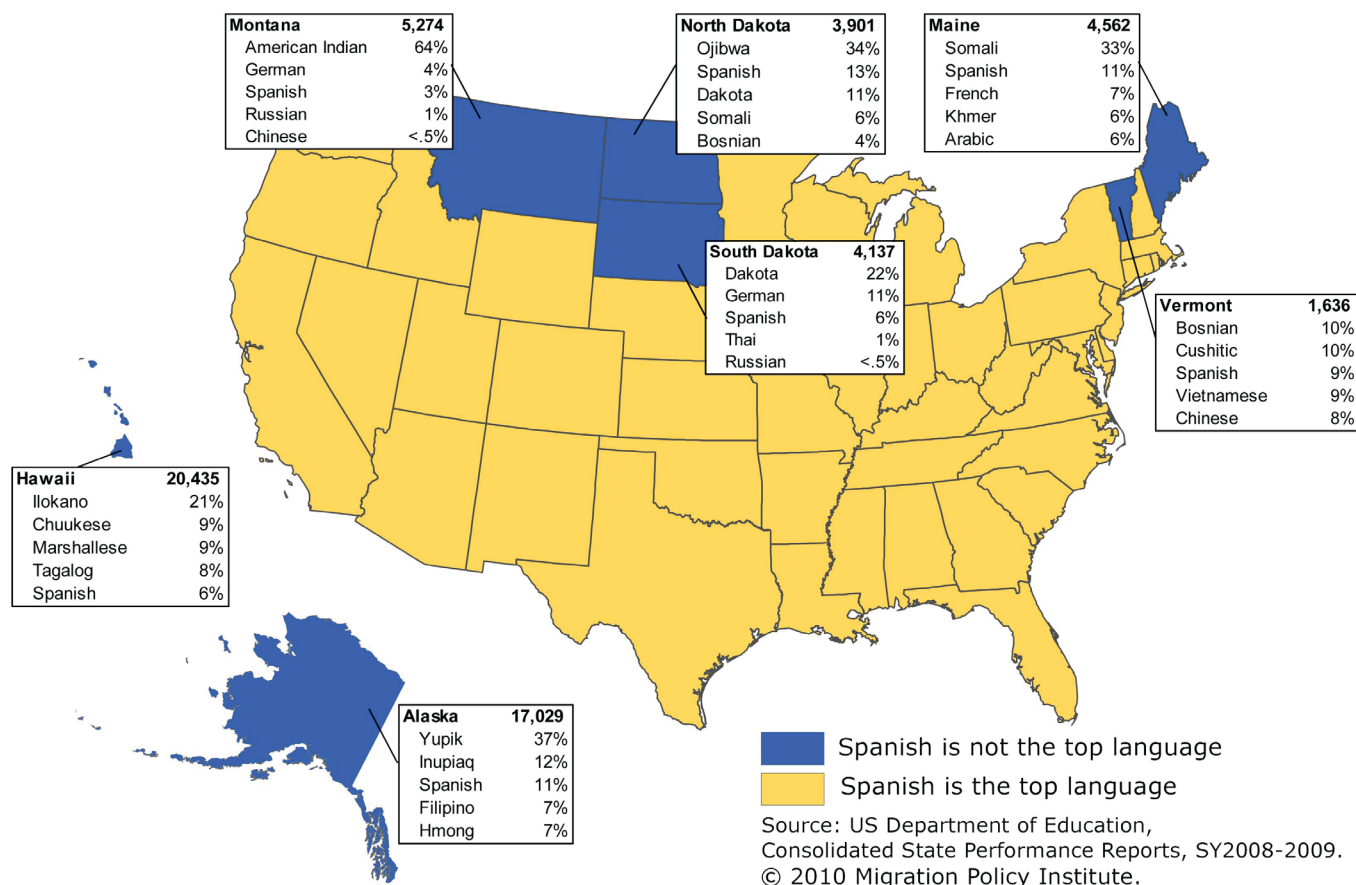
The US Department of Education reports<sup>3</sup> that an overwhelming majority of ELLs (77.2 percent, or more than 3.6 million) enrolled nationwide in school year 2008-2009 spoke Spanish.<sup>4</sup> The next two most commonly spoken languages, Vietnamese and Chinese, accounted for only 1.8 percent and 1.4 percent, respectively. Hmong and Arabic each were spoken by about 1 percent of ELL students.

Note: Data from the ACS and US Department of Education show a somewhat different distribution of the top languages because of the different data sources and different definitions of ELLs; however, the general picture they paint of the languages spoken by ELL students is quite consistent.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Spanish Is Not the Top Language Spoken by ELLs in Every State

According to US Department of Education data, a language other than Spanish was the top language spoken by ELLs in seven states (see Map 1).

**Map 1. Seven States with a Language Other than Spanish as the Top Language Spoken by ELL Students, SY2008-2009**



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

In five of these states, the ELL population was composed of speakers of indigenous languages such as Yupik in Alaska, Ilokano in Hawaii, Ojibwa in North Dakota, Dakota in South Dakota, and unspecified North American Indian languages in Montana.<sup>6</sup>

Vermont and Maine are states in which a diverse range of refugee populations have resettled over the course of the last two decades.<sup>7</sup> This explains why the top language spoken by ELL students in Vermont is Bosnian, and in Maine is Somali. Minnesota is another state in which languages of refugee groups — Hmong, Somali, and Vietnamese — are among the top five languages spoken by ELLs in the state.

### III. In Many States, One Language Predominates

In 28 states, more than two-thirds of ELL students speak the same home language and that language is Spanish. In 13 of these states, 80 percent or more of ELL students speak Spanish (see Table 1). These states included those with traditionally large populations of Spanish-speaking immigrants (e.g., Texas and California) as well as new destination immigrant states (e.g., Wyoming, Arkansas, and Colorado).

While the high frequency of one home language may give school districts opportunities for economies of scale in providing education services to ELL students and in communicating with their parents, it can also complicate the development of effective services for those speaking less common languages.

**Table 1. States with 80 Percent or More ELLs Speaking One Predominant Language, SY2008-2009 (sorted by share accounted for by the top spoken language)**

State	Language 1	Language 2	Language 3	Language 4	Language 5	Percent of ELLs Speaking the Top Language	Percent of ELLs Speaking Top 5 Languages
Wyoming	Spanish	Arapaho	Korean	Filipino; Pilipino	Japanese	90.4	97.3
Texas	Spanish	Vietnamese	Chinese	Arabic	Urdu	88.5	91.7
Arkansas	Spanish	Marshallese	Hmong	Vietnamese	Lao	87.7	95.7
Nevada	Spanish	Tagalog	Filipino; Pilipino	Chinese	Vietnamese	86.8	96.6
Colorado	Spanish	Vietnamese	Arabic	Chinese	Russian	86.7	91.5
California	Spanish	Vietnamese	Chinese	Tagalog	Hmong	84.8	92.2
Idaho	Spanish	American Indian	Undetermined	Russian	Arabic	84.3	89.5
Alabama	Spanish	Korean	Vietnamese	Arabic	Chinese	83.7	91.2
North Carolina	Spanish	Hmong	Vietnamese	Arabic	Chinese	82.9	89.5
Utah	Spanish	Navajo	Vietnamese	Tonga	Samoan	82.8	89.1
Oklahoma	Spanish	Cherokee	Vietnamese	Hmong	Chinese	81.8	90.5
Kansas	Spanish	Undetermined	Vietnamese	German	Chinese	81.1	93.4
Arizona	Spanish	Navajo	Vietnamese	Arabic	Somali	80.0	83.8

Source: 2008-2009 Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR), [www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html).

#### IV. In a Number of States, ELLs are Linguistically Heterogeneous

Other states have ELL student populations that speak a diverse set of languages. In ten states, less than half of ELL students spoke the top language (see Table 2). For example, in Vermont, only 11 percent of students spoke Bosnian, the state's top language of ELL students, while another 36.5 percent spoke the next four languages (Cushitic, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese). In Ohio, 40.2 percent spoke the top language (Spanish) but the other top languages — Somali, Arabic, German, and Japanese — represented different world regions and together accounted for 20.7 percent.

**Table 2. States with Less than 50 Percent of ELLs Speaking the Top Home Language, SY2008-2009 (sorted by share speaking the top language)**

State	Language 1	Language 2	Language 3	Language 4	Language 5	Percent of ELLs Speaking the Top Language	Percent of ELLs Speaking Top 5 Languages
Vermont	Bosnian	Cushitic	Spanish	Vietnamese	Chinese	10.5	46.9
Hawaii	Ilocano	Chuukese	Marshallese	Tagalog	Spanish	21.4	53.5
South Dakota	Dakota	German	Spanish	Thai	Russian	22.5	41.6
Maine	Somali	Spanish	French	Khmer	Arabic	33.4	63.1
North Dakota	Ojibwa	Spanish	Dakota	Somali	Bosnian	34.0	67.2
Alaska	Yupik	Inupiaq	Spanish	Filipino	Hmong	37.4	73.5
New Hampshire	Spanish	Chinese	Portuguese	Arabic	Vietnamese	39.5	57.2
Minnesota	Spanish	Hmong	Somali	Vietnamese	Russian	39.7	81.7
Ohio	Spanish	Somali	Arabic	German	Japanese	40.2	60.9
Michigan	Spanish	Arabic	Syriac	Undetermined	Albanian	42.4	71.2

Source: 2008-2009 Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR), [www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html).

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

#### Endnotes

- 1 The estimates of the top ten languages spoken by ELL students nationally are based on Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of the Census Bureau 2009 American Community Survey (ACS). ACS asks respondents to report the language that he/she speaks at home, particularly if a language other than English is spoken. ELL students were defined as those currently enrolled in school, between ages 5 and 18, and who were reported speaking English less than "very well" on their ACS questionnaire.
- 2 Vietnamese has a Romanized-script for its writing. Similar to Western languages, its sentence structure follows a subject-verb-object order. It is different from Western languages as it has tones, and its nouns, adjectives, and verbs do not change in number or gender. For more see, Southeast Asia Digital Library, *About Vietnamese*, <http://sea.lib.niu.edu/lang/vietnamese.html>.
- 3 The US Department of Education data are from the Consolidated State Performance Reports (CSPR), SY2008-2009, available at [www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html) (Section 1.6.2 Student Demographic Data). States receiving funding on the basis of the Consolidated State Application are mandated to submit a CSPR annually to the US Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The CSPR's main purpose is to report data on multiple No Child Left Behind programs, including students' performance and progress on academic, vocational, and transition outcomes.
- 4 In their annual CSPR, states have to provide the five most commonly spoken languages, other than English, for all ELL students (not only those who received Title III services). The directions on CSPR state that "the top five languages should be determined by the highest number of students speaking each of the languages listed." Some states, such as New York and Kansas, did not provide the exact language name for one of the top languages, using instead an "undetermined" or "uncoded languages" category. In this Fact Sheet, the overall US ELL enrollment number and the number of top languages are the sum of the state totals; due to inconsistencies in state reporting to the

US Department of Education, they thus might underestimate the predominance of certain languages.

- 5 The differences stem mainly from two factors. First, regarding the ACS, which is a survey of the entire US population, it is usually the case that one family member provides information, including language ability, about self and others in the family. In contrast, CSPR data are based on the information states collect directly from schools' student data. Second, the ACS definition of ELL status is based on one's ability to speak English, whereas the CSPR definition of ELL status is based on the actual testing of student abilities to speak, write, read, and understand English.
- 6 These figures indicate the most commonly spoken languages by ELL students, but do not necessarily indicate that students are fully fluent in them.
- 7 Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Annual Report to Congress FY 2007* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008), [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/ORR\\_2007\\_report.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/ORR_2007_report.pdf).

This Fact Sheet was written by Jeanne Batalova and Margie McHugh as part of the 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 regarding English Language Learners for educators, policymakers, and others. The ELL Information Center can be found at <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/ell-information-center>.

For questions or to arrange an interview, please contact Michelle Mittelstadt at 202-266-1910 or [mmittelstadt@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:mmittelstadt@migrationpolicy.org).

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