



Office of English Language Acquisition

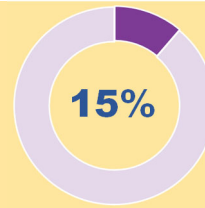
English Learners and Critical Languages

The U.S. government encourages the study of critical languages spoken in geographic areas of strategic importance to U.S. national security and the global economy through a variety of discretionary grants and scholarship programs.¹ U.S. students are traditionally underrepresented in the study of these languages; however, **many of our nation’s K–12 English learners (ELs) enter U.S. schools already speaking these critical languages as home or heritage languages.**² A federally funded consensus study reported that without school or home support, attrition of these home languages can occur as soon as 12 months after exposure to the dominant language.³

Number and Percentage of Identified English Learners Who Spoke a Critical Language: School Year 2018–19⁴

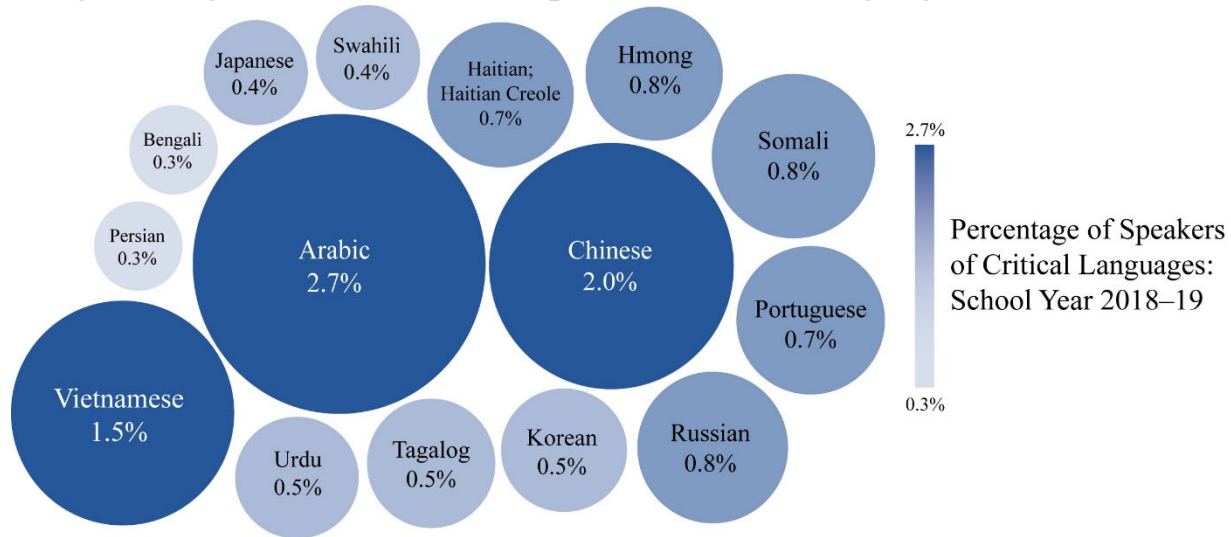
737,332

Number of ELs who spoke a critical language in school year (SY) 2018–19.



Percentage of ELs out of all identified ELs who spoke a critical language: SY 2018–19.

Percentage of English Learners Who Spoke a Critical Language: School Year 2018–19⁵



In SY 2018–19, there were more than 5 million K–12 ELs in the United States who spoke more than 400 languages. Nationally, the top five languages other than English most commonly spoken by ELs included four critical languages—Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Somali.⁶

Sources: All Identified EL Students — U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *EDFacts* file 141, Data Group 678, extracted on Feb. 22, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), *State nonfiscal survey of public elementary/secondary education, 1990–91 through 2018–19*; Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Data Center, Enrollment Data, 2016, 2017, and 2018, retrieved Aug. 11, 2020, from <https://www.dodea.edu/datacenter/enrollment.cfm> and State Public Elementary and Secondary Enrollment Projection Model, 1980 through 2029. (This table was prepared August 2020.)

¹ For more information about the National Security Education Program’s (NSEP’s) critical languages list, please visit <https://www.nsep.gov/content/critical-languages>.

² A heritage language is one that the speaker regards as their native, home, or ancestral language. https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/BE021775/Glossary_of_Terms.pdf

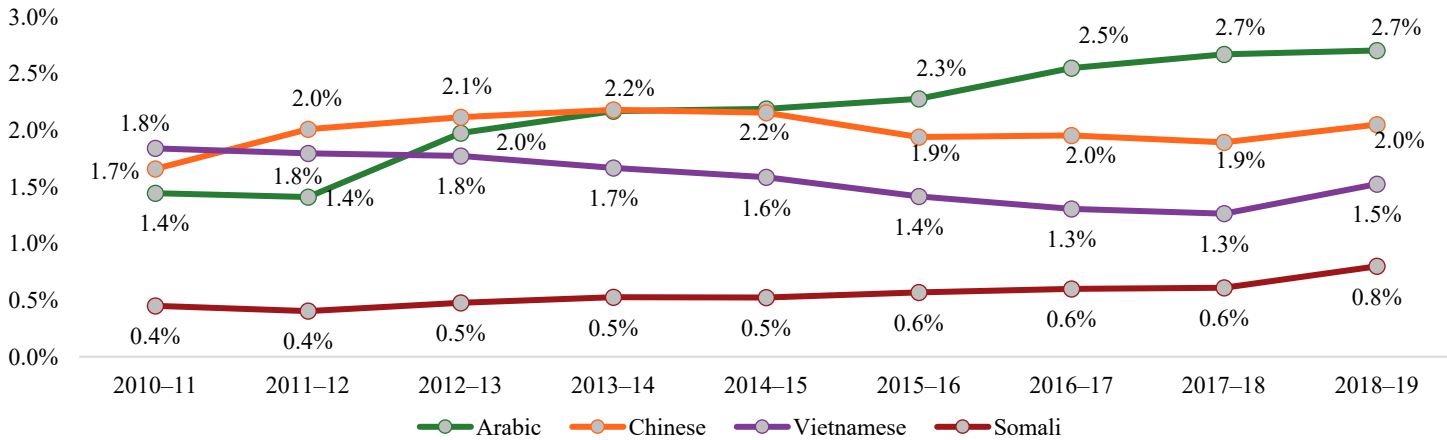
³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>

⁴ Author calculations: The number of ELs who speak a critical language was calculated by the sum of the ELs who speak a critical language as per the NSEP. The percentage of identified ELs who speak a critical language was calculated by dividing the number of identified ELs who speak a critical language by the total number of identified ELs in SY 2018–19 and multiplied by 100.

⁵ Author calculations: This visual represents the top 15 critical languages listed by the NSEP. The percentages were calculated from the sum of identified ELs who speak a top 15 critical language divided by the total number of identified ELs in SY 2018–19 and multiplied by 100.

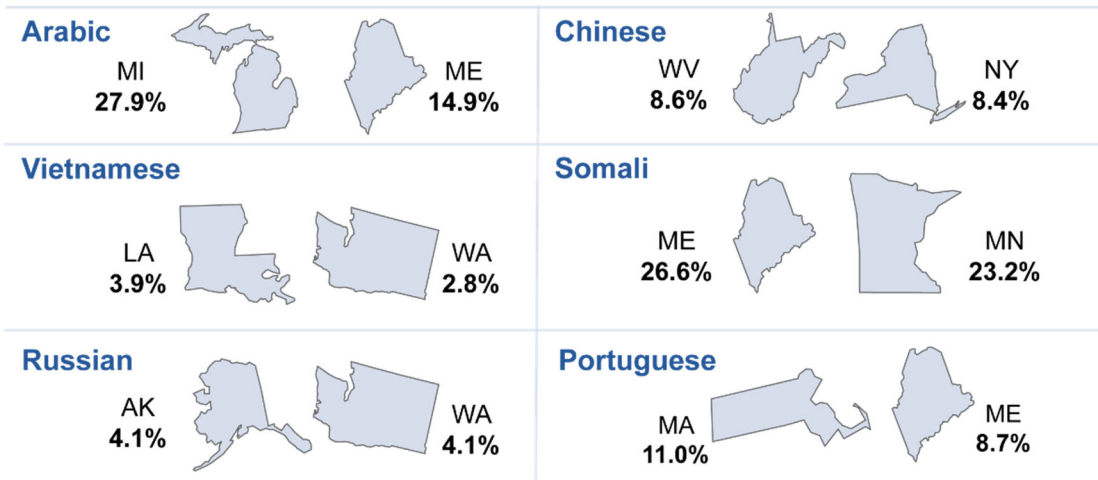
⁶ In this fact sheet, Chinese includes both Cantonese and Mandarin.

Percentage of Identified English Learners Who Spoke the Top Four Critical Languages: School Years 2010–11 to 2018–19



Since SY 2010–11, there has been an increase in the number of ELs who speak some of the most common critical languages, with the percentage point change of identified ELs who speak Arabic and Somali almost doubling during that time period.

States With the Highest Percentage of Identified English Learners Who Spoke a Critical Language: School Year 2018–19⁷



Each school year, state educational agencies (SEAs) report the top five languages spoken by ELs. Only nine out of 51 SEAs reported critical languages in their top five most commonly spoken languages.⁸ Maine reported three critical languages—Somali, Arabic, and Portuguese—among languages most commonly spoken by ELs in SY 2018–19. Washington reported two critical languages—Russian and Vietnamese—among languages most commonly spoken by ELs. In SY 2018–19, Maine and Washington had varied EL population sizes. While Maine was one of the SEAs with the smallest percentages of ELs (3% of the K–12 student population with 5,989 ELs in total), Washington was one of the SEAs with the largest percentages of ELs (11% of the K–12 student population with 128,795 ELs in total).

Schools can foster ELs’ proficiency in these critical languages by

- developing and implementing high-quality dual language programs.⁹
- promoting *translanguaging*—the use of fluid language practices within multilingual communities.¹⁰
- providing ELs with equitable opportunities to earn awards that recognize proficiency in a language other than English.

⁷ Author calculations: States with the highest percentage of identified ELs who speak a critical language were calculated by dividing the number of ELs who speak a critical language in each state by the total number of ELs in that state and multiplying by 100.

⁸ Includes data from 51 states. Data for Vermont were not available in SY 2018–19.

⁹ U.S. Department of Education. Office of English Language Acquisition. (2015). *Dual language education programs: Current state policies and practices*.

https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/TO20_DualLanguageRpt_508.pdf

¹⁰ REL Pacific. (n.d.). *Translanguaging to support students’ bilingual and multilingual development*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_PA_Translanguaging_to_Support_Students.pdf