

# California Counts

POPULATION TRENDS AND PROFILES

Hans P. Johnson, editor

Volume 3 Number 4 • February 2002

## The Linguistic Landscape of California Schools

By Sonya M. Tafoya

### Summary

As of 2000, nearly 25 percent of all California public school children were identified as having only limited English language skills. Although public school enrollment has grown by 50 percent over the past two decades, the number of students with limited English proficiency has risen six times as much. Many of these students lag behind their peers academically, even after they have been designated as English proficient, and thus their growing ranks merit attention. This report analyzes data from the California Department of Education and other sources and arrives at the following findings. First, many English learners are not themselves immigrants but are U.S.-born children of immigrants. Second, 83 percent of these students speak Spanish as a primary language. Regionally, the share of these students in the Los Angeles area has declined from 60 percent two decades ago to 51 percent as of 2000. Over this same period, the Inland Empire, the Sacramento area, and the San Joaquin Valley have experienced the most dramatic increases in non-English-proficient students. Although Spanish predominates, 55 other languages are tracked in the schools. The most prevalent non-English languages are Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, Cantonese, Filipino, and Cambodian. The incidences of various languages are sensitive to international migration trends and immigrant preferences for state of destination. As long as California remains a favored destination for immigrants, the challenges of educating students whose primary language is other than English will continue into the foreseeable future.

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**Of the nation's 3.4 million students identified as English learners, 41 percent reside in California.**

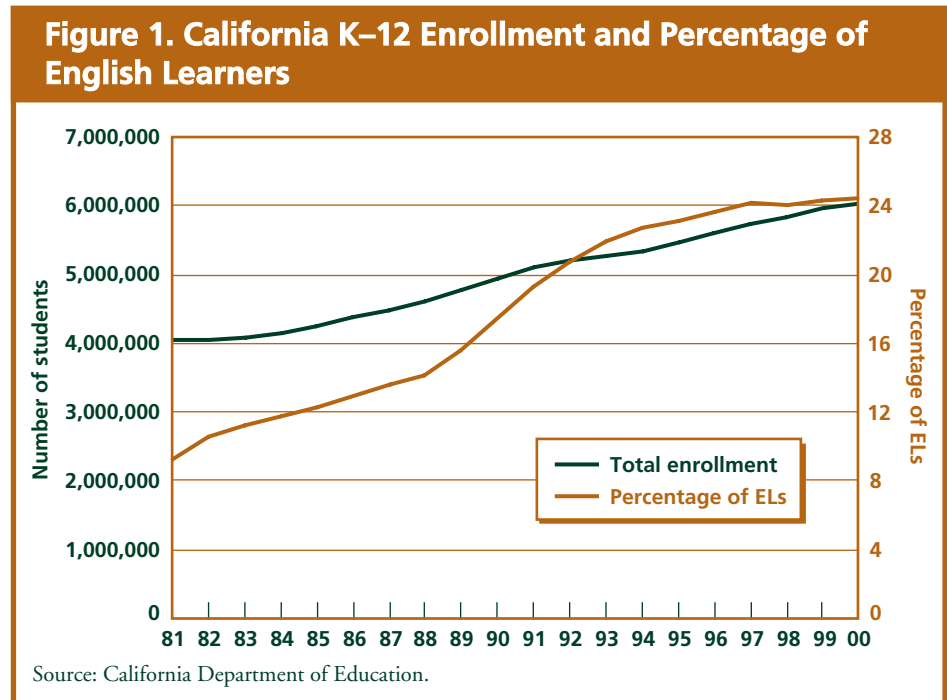
### Introduction

California has long been a favored destination for immigrants, and current trends in English language proficiency in the public schools dramatically illustrate the manner in which immigration has transformed and challenged California's public school system. Of the nation's 3.4 million students identified as English learners, 41 percent reside in California (Macias, 2000).

English learners (ELs),<sup>1</sup> defined as students who lack the English language proficiency to succeed in the school's regular instructional programs, now account for nearly 25 percent (1.4 million) of California's public school students

(Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Although California's total public school enrollment has increased by 50 percent since 1981, the number of English learners has risen by nearly 300 percent. California's English learners are more concentrated in the lower grades. For example, in the 1998–1999 school year, 45 percent of English learners were in kindergarten through third grade, 24 percent were in fourth through sixth grades, 12 percent were in grades seven and eight, and 17 percent were in grades nine through twelve.

California's English learners speak numerous languages. In 1988, the California Department of Education tracked 48 languages; and by 2000, eight more



languages had been added to the list. In part, this growth represents state educators' increasing experience and knowledge in identifying language groups. There is also an additional category specified as "other non-English languages."

Understanding the growing population of English learners is important to policymakers for several reasons. The foremost concern is that English learners constitute a student population vulnerable to poor academic outcomes. They often require a specialized curriculum and qualified teachers who are skilled in meeting their particular needs, and many of these students continue to lag behind native English speakers academically even after they have been redesignated as fluent English proficient (Rumberger, 2000). Particularly vulnerable are older students who enter the school system with little or no formal education. In addition to lacking English language skills, many of these students also lack the general academic preparation for subjects usually taught to students of their age. Because poverty rates among English learners are generally higher than among other students, many English learners must also overcome the effects of poverty to succeed in school (Moss and Puma, 1995). In addition, many English learners also have distinct racial, cultural, and linguistic characteristics that may make their social navigation through the pub-

lic school system more challenging. In spite of these obstacles, the California Class Size Reduction program has had the initial result of concentrating the number of teachers with lower qualifications in schools with the highest percentages of English learners (Stecher and Bohrnstedt, 2000). In sum, many English learners face unfavorable odds in their pursuit of academic success and social adjustment.

There are also long-term economic implications associated with the education of English learners. Full economic integration is associated with English proficiency. The range of occupations open to English-proficient workers is much broader than the range for those with lesser English skills (McManus, 1990). Likewise, there is a positive relationship between English reading proficiency and higher earnings (Chiswick, 1991). Given that English learners are a large and growing segment of the school-age population, their academic achievement and consequent labor market prospects should be a major concern for policymakers.

This issue of *California Counts* explores the demographics of California's English learners. It provides a current geographic portrait of this segment of the school population, highlighting regions that have undergone the most dramatic transformations in student populations. It also illustrates how recent immigration trends have

**The foremost concern is that English learners constitute a student population vulnerable to poor academic outcomes.**

shaped the population of English learners and contributed to their particular needs.

## Data Sources

Data for this report are drawn from several sources. Enrollment data come from the California Basic Educational Data System; these data are collected annually in October for California's K–12 public schools. Data on students in the public schools who speak a language other than English in the home are collected in March and appear annually in the Language Census.<sup>3</sup>

Students who speak a language other than English at home are assessed for their English language proficiency upon enrollment. Those who do not meet the district criteria for English fluency

are identified as English learners; those who meet the specified criteria are classified as fluent English proficient (FEP). Students initially classified as English learners are tested periodically for their English language skills and, when considered proficient in English, are reassigned from EL to FEP status.<sup>4</sup>

Data on legal immigration to California come from the Department of Finance's tabulations of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) data.

## Immigration and Trends in Linguistic Diversity

**A**lthough ongoing immigration is the primary source of linguistic diversity in California's schools, the majority of California children designated as English learners are not themselves recent immigrants but rather are U.S.-born children of immigrant parents.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, estimates suggest that only about 10 percent of California's school-age children (ages 5–17) are foreign-born, whereas over 45 percent have at least one foreign-born parent.<sup>6</sup> Thus U.S.-born children of immigrants represent a large share of English learners, illustrating that growth in the number of EL students is a result not only of overall immigration flows but also of the age structure and fer-

tility rates of immigrant populations. For example, immigrant women tend to be young and to bear more children than native-born women. The fertility rate for foreign-born Hispanics in California in 1997 was four, whereas the fertility rate for all native-born women was just under two. Fertility rates for foreign-born Asian and Pacific Islander women were also higher (Johnson et al., 2001).

Country of origin also plays a role in determining not only the size of the EL population but also the share of EL students speaking a particular language. For example, Table 1 shows the top five countries of birth for legal immigrants who came to California between 1984 and 1998. In almost every case, Mexico and the Philippines rank as the first and second sending countries. As reflected in Table 2, Spanish was and continues to be the most dominant language of English learners in California, which is not unexpected given the number of Mexican immigrants entering the state over the past two decades.

Conversely, the Philippines ranked relatively high as an immigrant-sending country, yet Filipino ranked as only the fifth or sixth most common non-English language. Although the character of Filipino immigration before 1965 was shaped largely by rural workers with little education, after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, a signifi-

cant number of highly educated professionals and urban dwellers began emigrating from the Philippines (Mangiafico, 1988). Although Filipino is the official language of the Philippines, English is the language of higher education (National Statistics Coordination Board, 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that 1990 Census figures for California show that when compared to Mexican and Central American immigrants, Filipino immigrants included a smaller share with limited English ability—only 7 percent (Reyes, 2001). Furthermore, measures of immigrant educational attainment show that in 1990, 43 percent of Filipino adults had a college education, whereas the norm for native-born Americans was 20 percent (Rumbaut and Cornelius, 1995). Thus, the relatively high levels of education and English language ability of Philippine immigrants—the second largest immigrant group in California—moderate the need for English language instruction for Filipino children.

One factor that adds to the complexity of California's EL population is the presence of immigrants admitted as refugees. Southeast Asians represent the most striking example. Their immigration to California, unlike that of their Mexican or Philippine counterparts, was more recent and more compressed. In 1980, Southeast Asian refugees

Table 1. Top Five Countries of Birth of Legal Immigrants, 1984–1998

FFY	Rank				
	1	2	3	4	5
1984	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	Korea	China
1985	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	Korea	China
1986	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	Korea	China
1987	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	Korea
1988	Mexico	Philippines	China	Vietnam	Korea
1989	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	Iran
1990	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	Iran
1991	Philippines	Mexico	Vietnam	Soviet Union	China
1992	Mexico	Vietnam	Philippines	El Salvador	China
1993	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	El Salvador
1994	Mexico	Philippines	China	Vietnam	El Salvador
1995	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	India
1996	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	India
1997	Mexico	Philippines	Vietnam	China	India
1998	Mexico	Philippines	China	India	Vietnam

Source: California Department of Finance's tabulations of INS data.

in California numbered close to 145,000 (ORR, 1981). During the remainder of the 1980s, the number of new Southeast Asian refugees coming to California ranged from 10,000 to 15,000 annually. By 1990, the number had grown to nearly 20,000, peaking at just over 30,000 in 1992. After 1993, the numbers began to decline and by 1998 were down to 6,519 (California Department of Finance, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2000).

As might be expected, the number of English learners speaking Southeast Asian languages grew rapidly in the late 1980s and

Table 2. Most Prevalent Non-English Languages and Number of K–12 Students Speaking These Languages, 1981–2000

Rank	1981	1990	2000
1	Spanish 285,567	Spanish 655,097	Spanish 1,222,809
2	Vietnamese 22,826	Vietnamese 34,934	Vietnamese 39,447
3	Cantonese 14,196	Cantonese 21,154	Hmong 28,374
4	Korean 7,508	Khmer (Cambodian) 19,234	Cantonese 25,509
5	Filipino (Tagalog) 6,752	Hmong 18,091	Filipino (Tagalog) 18,193
6	Lao 5,585	Filipino (Tagalog) 16,338	Khmer (Cambodian) 16,283

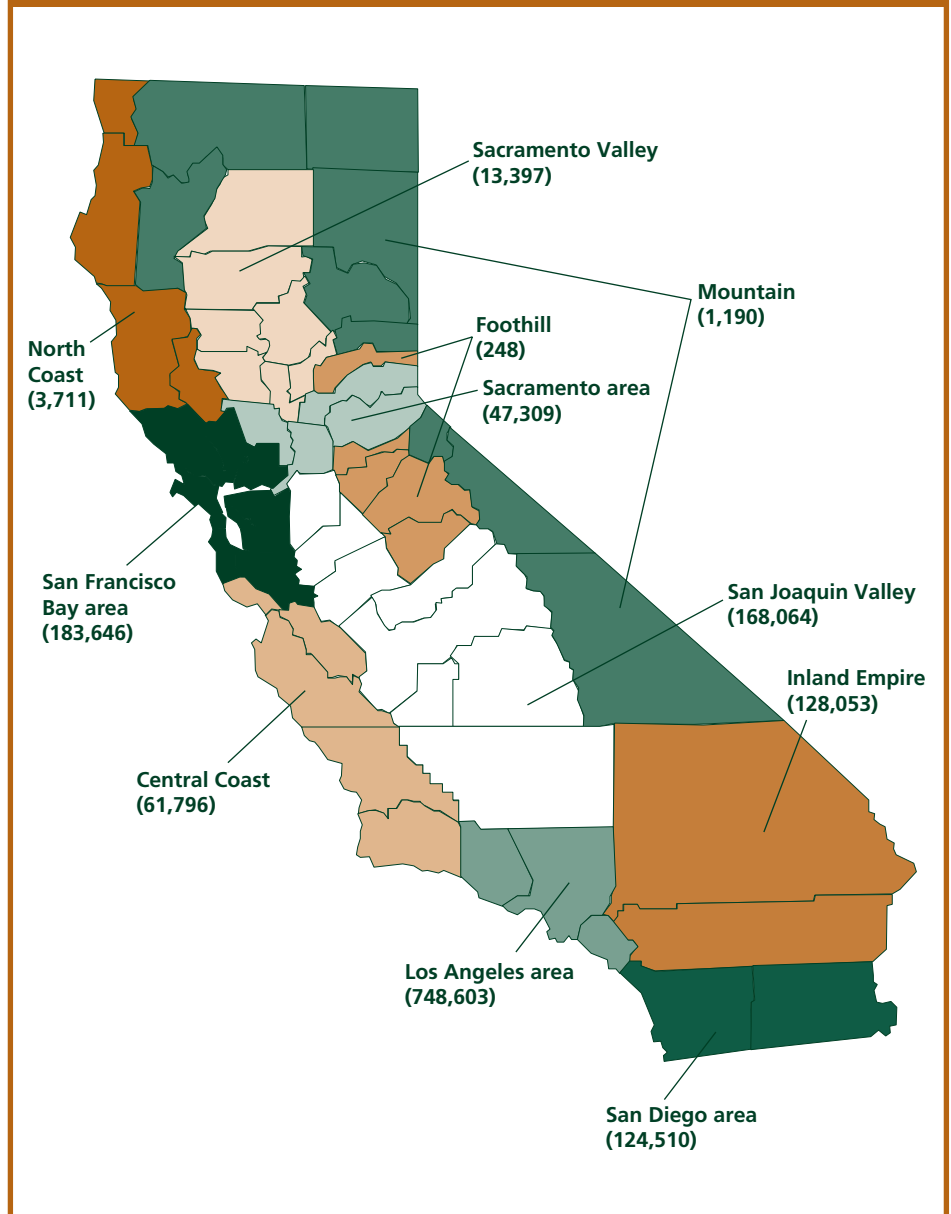
Source: California Department of Education.

early 1990s. This growth was due in part to the youthful age structure and relatively high fertility rates of this population. In 1980, school-age children accounted for 31.2 percent of the Southeast Asian immigrant population.<sup>7</sup> Another factor that contributed to the prevalence of Southeast Asian English learners in the state was the geographic preference of Southeast Asians. Not only did many primary refugees settle in California but many more refugees eventually resettled in California after having initially settled in other states (ORR, 1981). Southeast Asian English learners also posed a special challenge to schools. The traumas of war and relocation meant that EL instruction was only one of the multitude of services necessary for many of these refugees to transition into American schools (ORR, 1981).<sup>8</sup>

## Statewide Distribution of English Learners

Just as English learners vary in their nativity and country of origin, they also vary in their distribution throughout the state. Although the number of English learners has been increasing in virtually every county over the past 20 years, disaggregating the state into regions reveals several broad trends. Figure 2 illustrates the

Figure 2. Number of K–12 English Learners by Region, 2000



regions and the number of K–12 EL students in each.<sup>9</sup> Table 3 shows the number and share of California’s English learners in each region for 1981 and 2000. It also shows each region’s share of California’s total enrollment, and the percentage change in the region’s English learner population.

Beginning with the most populous region, one clear trend during this 20-year period was the decline in the Los Angeles area’s share of the state’s English learners and an increase in share for the remaining populous regions of the state.<sup>10</sup> Even though the Los Angeles area was home to about half of the state’s English learners in 2000, its share had declined

from 60 percent in 1981. Nevertheless, the Los Angeles area continued to have the highest share of the state’s English learners (51 percent) relative to its share of the state’s enrollment (38 percent). In fact, the San Francisco Bay area was the only other region that had a greater-than-expected share of English learners, relative to its share of the state’s enrollment. Although the Los Angeles region has historically maintained the largest share of the state’s English learners, its increase in English learners from 1981 to 2000, on a percentage basis, was the lowest among all of the state’s regions (Figure 3). That a regional increase in English learners of 231 percent

is considered low illustrates just how much the population of English learners grew.

More dramatic changes in EL populations occurred in the Inland Empire, Sacramento area, Mountain, Sacramento Valley, and San Joaquin Valley regions (Figure 3). In fact, the percentage increases in English learners in these regions were more than twice those of Los Angeles. These data are consistent with general population trends across the state from 1980 to 2000 (Table 3). For example, the Inland Empire was the fastest growing region between 1980 and 2000: Its entire population increased by 109 percent, its total school enrollment by 133

**Table 3. Number and Share of K–12 EL Students by Region, 1981–2000**

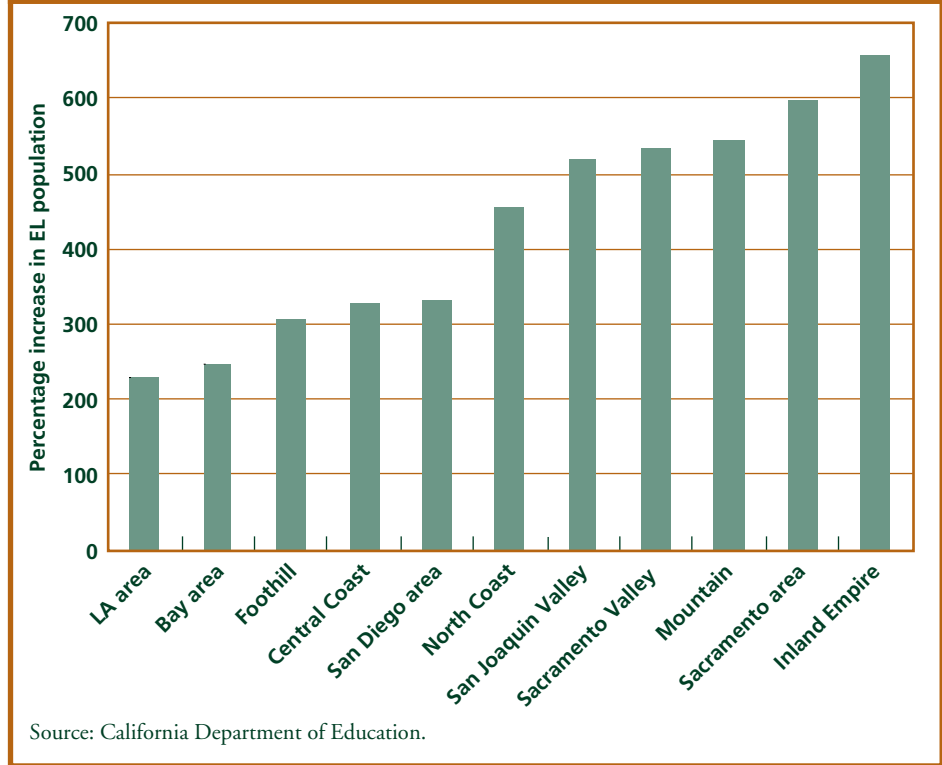
Region	No. of ELs		Share of State’s ELs		Share of State’s Enrollment, 2000	% Increase in No. of Region’s ELs, 1981–2000	% Increase in Region’s Total Enrollment, 1981–2000
	1981	2000	1981	2000			
Los Angeles area	226,492	748,603	59.8	50.6	38.3	231	38
San Francisco Bay area	53,098	183,646	13.0	16.6	16.2	246	23
Inland Empire	16,948	128,053	6.8	8.3	11.6	656	133
San Joaquin Valley	27,263	168,064	6.5	7.8	12.2	516	75
San Diego area	28,680	124,510	6.4	7.5	8.6	334	57
Sacramento area	6,799	47,309	3.7	4.2	5.5	596	69
Central Coast	14,483	61,796	2.7	3.6	3.8	327	49
Sacramento Valley	2,117	13,397	0.3	0.8	1.9	533	42
North Coast	668	3,711	0.4	0.4	0.9	456	25
Foothill	61	248	0.3	0.2	0.6	307	50
Mountain	185	1,190	0.1	0.1	0.5	543	7

Source: California Department of Education.

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**The San Francisco Bay area ranked second only to the Los Angeles area in terms of its number and share of English learners.**

**Figure 3. Percentage Increase in EL Population by Region, 1981–2000**



percent, and its EL population by 656 percent. As of 2000, the Inland Empire accounted for 8 percent of the state’s English learners and 12 percent of California’s total school enrollment.

The Sacramento area underwent similar though less dramatic changes. Although the total population in the Sacramento area increased by 63 percent and the total school enrollment by 69 percent, the percentage increase in English learners was nearly nine times as great, increasing by 596 percent. Likewise, the San Joaquin Valley’s total population grew by

61 percent, its total school enrollment by 75 percent, and its EL population by 516 percent. By 2000, these two regions together accounted for 12 percent of the states English learners—4.2 percent in the Sacramento area and 7.8 percent in the San Joaquin Valley.

The San Francisco Bay area ranked second only to the Los Angeles area in terms of its number and share of English learners. Seventeen percent of the state’s English learners resided in the San Francisco Bay area in 2000. Like the Los Angeles region, the San Francisco Bay area ranked rela-



tively low in terms of percentage increase in the general population, percentage increase in total student enrollment, and percentage increase in English learners. However, unlike the Los Angeles area, the San Francisco Bay area did increase its share of the state's English learner population. Whereas in 1981 it accounted for 13 percent of the state's English learners, by 2000 it accounted for nearly 17 percent, making it the only other region overrepresented in its share of English learners relative to its share of the state's total enrollment.

Finally, among the regions with greater than 1 percent of the EL population, the San Diego and Central Coast regions underwent increases in percentage of English learners greater than those in the Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay areas, but less than those in the Inland Empire, the Sacramento area, and the San Joaquin Valley.

Figure 3 shows the percentage increase in each region's EL population over the past 20 years.

## Predominance of Spanish and Persistence of Asian Languages

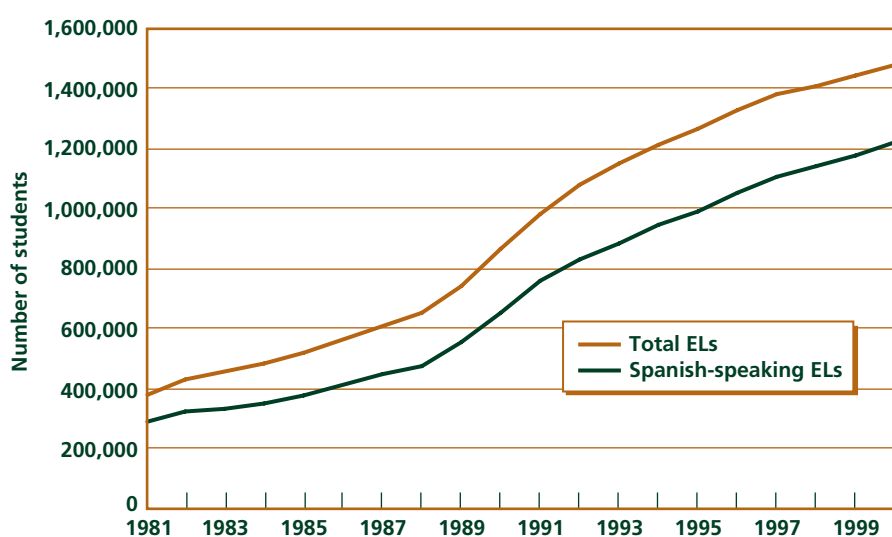
As Table 2 shows, Spanish has clearly been the most common primary language spoken by English learners over the past two

decades. Figure 4 compares the numerical growth of the Spanish-speaking EL population to that of the total EL population. Whereas Spanish-speaking English learners accounted for 76 percent of all English learners in 1981, by 2000 the figure had grown to 83 percent. The steepest increase in Spanish-speaking English learners occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. In California alone, 1.6 million unauthorized immigrants applied for amnesty (legal immigrant status) under this act.

The growth in share of Spanish speakers over this period is related to a simultaneous trend in

the number of English learners originating from Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup> Figure 5 illustrates the rise and fall in English learners whose primary language was Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, or Lao. For each of these languages, the number of English learners peaked in the 1990s. Although the number of English learners who speak a Southeast Asian language is now declining, the fact that legal immigration is dominated by family-sponsored immigration is likely to mean that new Southeast Asian immigrants will continue to settle among family members in California. Thus, Southeast Asian language speakers will probably persist among other language groups for the foreseeable future.

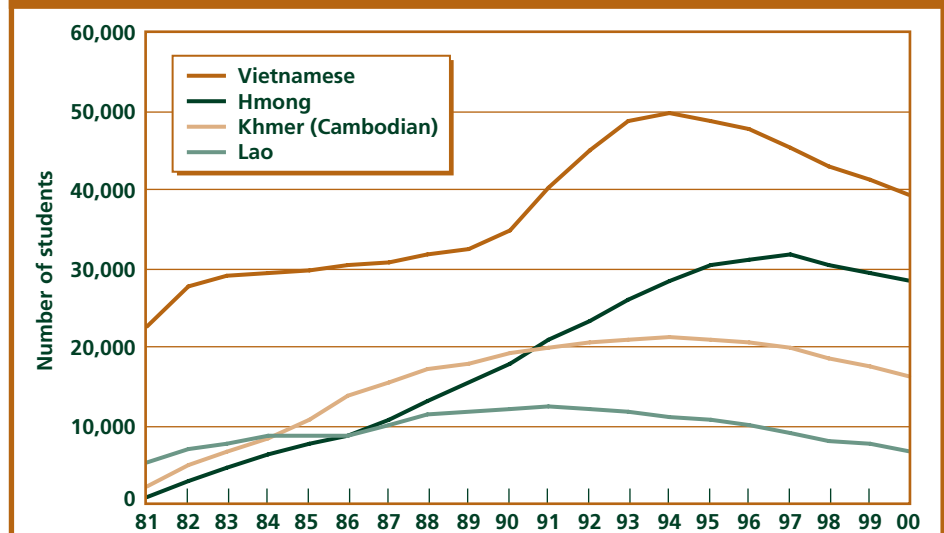
**Figure 4. Total EL and Spanish-Speaking EL K–12 Students, 1981–2000**



Source: California Department of Education.

Spanish has clearly been the most common primary language spoken by English learners over the past two decades.

**Figure 5. Number of K–12 Students Speaking Southeast Asian Languages, 1981–2000**



Source: California Department of Education.

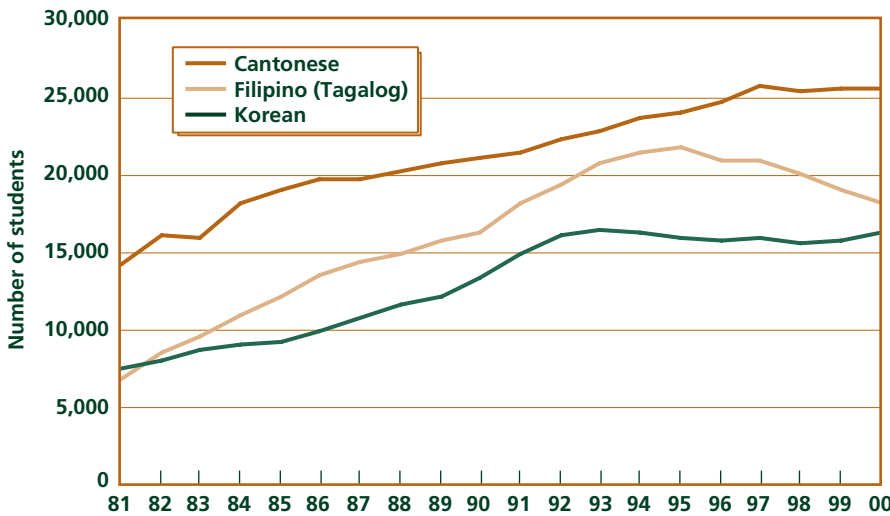
Figure 6 illustrates the trend in number of English learners whose primary language was Cantonese, Filipino, and Korean. These three languages round out the list of the most prevalent non-English languages shown in Table 2. China, the Philippines, and Korea, like Mexico, share an extensive immigration history with the United States. As of 1990, both Chinese-Americans and Filipino-Americans had long-established and sizable populations in California. Together, they constituted about 2 million of the state's residents in 2000 (Census 2000, STF-1 file).

The Korean population, although smaller than the Southeast Asian population in California,

has had a more prolonged, and as noted above, less compressed history of immigration. The trend in Korean-speaking English learners is thus more like the trend for Cantonese and Filipino speakers. Given the nature and history of immigration from China, the Philippines, and Korea, it is very likely that the languages native to these countries will continue to be among the primary languages of English learners in California schools.

Figure 7 illustrates trends in several languages that are shared among fewer EL students but that serve to demonstrate why it is likely that California will continue to have a wide array of English learners. Because California is a

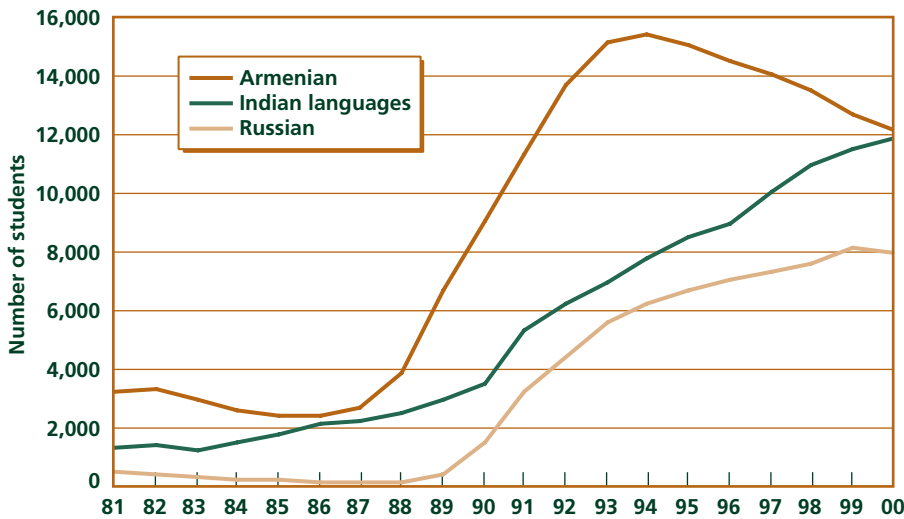
**Figure 6. Number of K–12 Students Speaking Cantonese, Filipino, and Korean, 1981–2000**



Asian languages round out the list of common primary languages of English learners.

Source: California Department of Education.

**Figure 7. Number of K–12 Students Speaking Armenian, Indian Languages, and Russian, 1981–2000**



Source: California Department of Education.

**At least 5,000 English learners in Sacramento's K–12 schools speak either Russian or Ukrainian. In fact, Sacramento County has twice as many Russian-speaking English learners (3,321) as Los Angeles County (1,656).**

leading destination for immigrants, international migration streams stemming from political instability, wars, and the development of new labor markets often have a direct effect on California demography. For example, Figure 7 shows the trend in Russian-speaking English learners, which increased sharply just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The growth in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Gujarati speakers mirrors the expansion of the high-technology industry in California and is most pronounced in the Silicon Valley—the destination for many foreign-born scientists and engineers (Saxenian, 1999). Finally, the increase in Armenian-speaking students in California schools can be traced to regional conflicts and the country's subsequent transition to independence.

## Exceptions to the Rule

County-level analysis indicated that EL students in most counties—30 of the 58—consisted of at least 90 percent native Spanish speakers. Yet, there were still a few counties in which the majority of English learners were not Spanish-speaking. These counties are the exception to the rule of Spanish dominance among EL populations. For example, the composition of English learners in Sacramento has been more sensitive to some of the migration

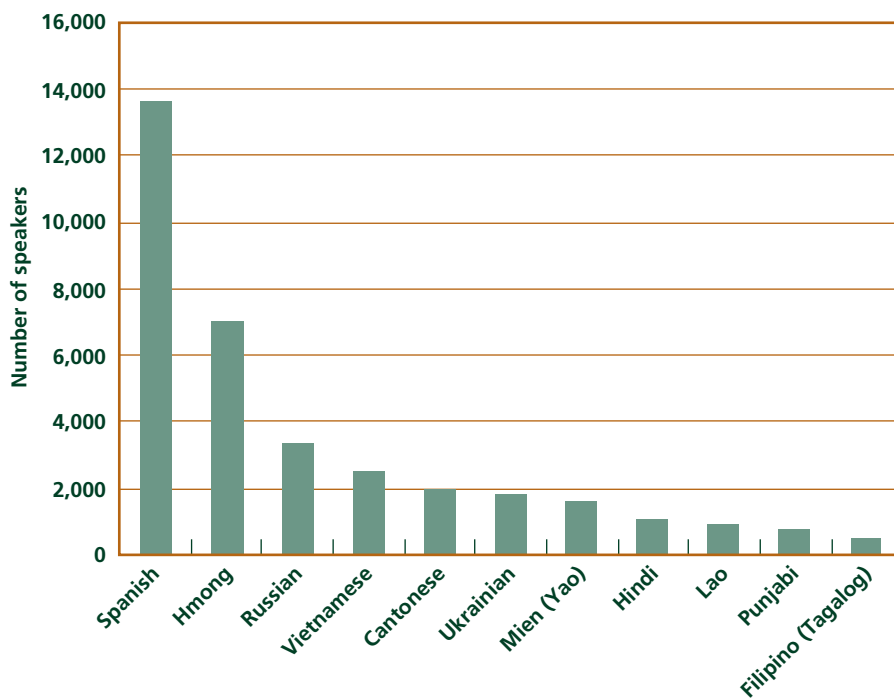
streams described above. In Sacramento County, which includes 3.7 percent of the state's total K–12 enrollment, less than 40 percent of the EL students are native Spanish speakers. As of 2000, 11 languages were spoken in the county by at least 500 students in each case (Figure 8). After Spanish, Hmong ranks as the most common language; and Vietnamese, Mien, and Lao complete the list of common Southeast Asian languages. At least 5,000 English learners in Sacramento's K–12 schools speak either Russian or Ukrainian. In fact, Sacramento County has twice as many Russian-speaking English learners (3,321) as Los Angeles County (1,656).

## Conclusion

As long as the United States in general, and California in particular, continue to be a destination of choice for immigrants, the state's public schools will face the challenge of educating English learners. An understanding of English learners is important not only because they constitute a group of students who are particularly vulnerable academically but also because they are a sizable and growing segment of the school-age population.

With the state's current focus on accountability and raising the standards for public schools,

**Figure 8. Non-English Languages in Sacramento County with 500 or More Speakers, 2000**



Source: California Department of Education.

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appropriate assessment of English learners is particularly important. If the 1.4 million English learners were all from the same language group, instruction and assessment of these students would be simpler. Although most of these students are Spanish-speaking, over 175,000 English learners in California speak a primary language other than Spanish.

Trends over the past two decades have illustrated the widening geographic range of English learners. Even California's North Coast region, comprising sparsely populated Del Norte,

Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino Counties, has seen the number of English learners grow from almost 700 students in 1981 to 3,700 student in 2000. Although the resources and efforts required to meet the needs of English learners concentrated in the Los Angeles area may be greater than those required along the North Coast, meeting these needs is now an issue in every region of the state. Likewise, the benefits of meeting these challenges—a generally well-educated and productive populace—extend to all Californians. ♦

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> English learner (EL) students (formerly known as limited English proficient or LEP students) are those K–12 students for whom there is a report of a primary language other than English on the state-approved Home Language Survey and who, on the basis of the state-approved oral language assessment procedures (including literacy for grades 3–12), have been determined to lack the clearly defined English language skills of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing necessary to succeed in the school's regular instructional programs.

<sup>2</sup> An additional 12.5 percent of K–12 students are classified as fluent English proficient (FEP). These include students who were either classified as FEP upon enrollment or who have sufficient mastery of English to be redesignated as FEP after initial enrollment as English learners.

<sup>3</sup> Language Census and enrollment counts are taken at different times during the school year; thus, when used together, as in this report, they provide only an approximation of the percentage of students who are English learners.

<sup>4</sup> These students are redesignated according to districts' multiple criteria, standards, and procedures, which demonstrate that students being redesignated have an English language proficiency comparable to that of average native English speakers.

<sup>5</sup> The Emergency Immigrant Assistance Act defines newcomer immigrants as foreign-born students who have been in the school system three or fewer years. Roughly 15 percent of English learners are eligible for assistance under this act.

<sup>6</sup> Author's calculations from the Current Population Survey, 1998–2000.

<sup>7</sup> For comparison, 23 percent of California's population in 2000 was between the ages of 5 and 19. Author's calculation from the Census 2000 STF-1 file for California.

<sup>8</sup> As of 1981, the Office of Refugee Resettlement provided support in the form of cash assistance, medical assistance, state supplementary payments for recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), social services, education, and health screening.

<sup>9</sup> We have divided the state into 11 regions. The San Francisco Bay area includes Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma Counties. The Central Coast includes Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz Counties. The San Joaquin Valley includes Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tulare Counties. The Inland Empire includes Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. The Los Angeles area includes Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura Counties. The Mountain area includes Inyo, Lassen, Modoc, Mono, Plumas, Sierra, Siskiyou, Trinity, and Alpine Counties. The North Coast region includes Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino Counties. The Sacramento area includes El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, and Yolo Counties. The Sacramento Valley includes Butte, Colusa, Glenn, Shasta, Sutter, Tehama, and Yuba Counties. The San Diego region includes San Diego and Imperial Counties. The Foothill region includes Amador, Calaveras, Mariposa, Nevada, and Tuolumne Counties.

<sup>10</sup> Less populous regions are defined as those with less than 1 percent of the state's school enrollment in 2000—the North Coast, Foothill, and Mountain regions.

<sup>11</sup> From year to year, changes in the number of English learners for a given language can be due to both new EL students entering the group and previously identified EL students being redesignated to FEP. The extent to which these factors are operating for different language groups cannot be assessed because redesignation rates are not tracked for each language group separately.

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