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Educating Emergent Bilinguals

Policies, Programs, and Practices for Multilingual Learners

THIRD EDITION

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and Claudia Cervantes-Soon

Foreword by Jim Cummins
Afterword by Ramón Antonio Martínez

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CHAPTER 2

Who Are the Emergent Bilinguals?

This chapter provides background information on emergent bilinguals. Specifically, the chapter asks the following key questions:

- How do we know who they are?
- How many are there?
- How are they designated as English language learners?
- How are they reclassified as fluent English speakers?
- Where do they live and go to school?
- What languages do they speak?
- What are their demographic characteristics with respect to:
 - » Ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics,
 - » Age distribution and access to pre-K and other programs, and
 - » Nativity?
- How do they use language?
- Who are the Latine students?
- What do all emergent bilinguals have in common?

In this chapter, we address the issue of how students are identified, counted, and designated as English learners, as we elucidate their sociolinguistic characteristics. The chapter also brings to the forefront the mismatch between the policy that dictates how data on their characteristics are collected and considered, the reality of the students themselves, and what research tells us about how best to educate emergent bilingual students. In other words, the dissonance between the research and the policies and practices enacted, which is the central theme of this book, begins with descriptive data that have shaped the way these students are defined. As we consider the data, we will point out these contradictions.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO THEY ARE?

Part of the difficulty in understanding the characteristics of emergent bilinguals results from the great inconsistency in the data that purport to describe them. Primary data on students needing services are collected using a variety of measures across different states. As we will see, states use different assessments for the identification of emergent bilinguals, sometimes measuring different abilities. The federal

government, in its most recent legislation (ESSA, 2015), has not resolved the inconsistencies in the data.

HOW MANY EMERGENT BILINGUALS ARE THERE?

However inaccurately these students are counted, we do know that the numbers of emergent bilinguals are increasing and growing much more rapidly than is the English-speaking student population. There are many different methods used to identify emergent bilingual students, including the U.S. Census, as well as data gathered by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition in an effort to hold states accountable for the education of these students. Because in this book we attempt to include the educational issues pertaining not just to students who are classified as English learners but also to those who are bilingual and who are usually not addressed in educational policy, we use a combination of data sources. At times, we rely on the data gathered by the Office of English Language Acquisition, which relies exclusively on the data from states on their English learners and how they are being serviced. But sometimes, we describe student demographics by including data from the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census, which is more inclusive of bilingual students who are not exclusively those identified by states as English learners and whose bilingualism is most often ignored in education.

Between 1995 and 2005, the enrollment of emergent bilinguals in public schools nationwide grew by 56%, whereas the entire student population grew by only 2.6% (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). According to data reported by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2020), although the total enrollment of students has remained flat, the number of emergent bilinguals increased from 4.6 million students in 2010 to 5.1 million students in the fall of 2019, with a small dip in population to 4.9 million in the fall of 2020 as a result of the pandemic (U.S. DoE, NCES, 2020; see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. shows that emergent bilingual students accounted for 10.1% of the total preschool through 12th grade enrollment in U.S. public schools in the fall of 2020 (U.S. DoE, Office for Civil Rights, 2024). That is, one out of 10 students in the United States in 2020 spoke a language other than English at home. This proportion has not significantly increased since the fall of 2009, when they accounted for 9.7% of the school population.

According to the American Community Survey (ACS, 2022a) of the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 2.5 million 5- to 17-year-old emergent bilinguals in 2022; in contrast, the states reported a total of 4,929,989 million ELLs for the same year. This discrepancy has to do with the fact that the Census Bureau relies on self-reports and asks only whether or not students speak English, but not whether they can read and write English. In addition, the census undercounts the undocumented population, which the states are more likely to count because they collect their data through the schools themselves. However, even school data may depict an inaccurate picture because ELL identification in schools is based on home language surveys, which we will discuss further subsequently, and which often mask

Table 2.1. Emergent Bilingual (EBL) Students Enrolled in Public and Elementary U.S. Schools

Year	# of EBL students	% of EBL students as % of total enrollment
2009–2010	4,647,016	9.7%
2011–2012	4,635,185	9.6%
2012–2013	4,850,293	10.0%
2013–2014	4,929,989	10.1%
Fall 2014	4,813,693	9.8%
Fall 2015	4,854,285	9.9%
Fall 2016	4,949,423	10.1%
Fall 2017	5,010,505	10.2%
Fall 2018	5,024,177	10.2%
Fall 2019	5,115,887	10.4%
Fall 2020	4,963,888	10.1%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES (2020b, Table 204.27).

important nuances. Finally, the federal government also gives states the flexibility to count students who were formerly classified as English learners for up to four years to ensure that schools remain accountable for their outcomes. While this provision provides a more accurate picture, it further adds to the discrepancies in number.

The U.S. Census provides information about the number of students between the ages of 5 and 17 who speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home. The census also asks families who report that they speak a LOTE at home to indicate their ability to speak English as either “very well,” “well,” “not well,” or “not at all.” Students who live in households where English is spoken less than “very well” are considered eligible for English language support. Table 2.2 indicates the number of 5- to 17-year-olds who speak languages other than English at home, as well as the number who live in families that speak English less than “very well.” Table 2.2 tells an interesting story. It is important to note that, although the percentage of youths who speak languages other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census, has significantly increased (21.4% in 2022 compared to 8.5% in 1979), the percentage of LOTE speakers who speak English less than “well” has decreased (21.5% in 2022 compared to 34.2% in 1979). That is, there is a rise in the number of *bilingual* students who are both speakers of other languages and also fluent speakers of English.

In fact, the increase in the number of bilingual students who are proficient in both English and another language in the U.S. school population has been considerable. From 1979 to 2022, while the number of students who spoke English less than very well increased (from 1.3M to 2.5M), the number of students who spoke

Table 2.2. Speakers of LOTE and Emergent Bilinguals (EBLs), 5 to 17 Years Old

Year	Total 5–17 years*	Number of speakers of LOTEs*	% total speakers of LOTEs	Number of EBLs**	% speakers of LOTEs who are identified as EBLs
1979	44.7	3.8	8.5%	1.3	34.2%
1989	42.3	5.2	12.3%	1.8	34.6%
1995	47.5	6.7	14.1%	2.4	35.8%
2000	52.5	9.5	18.1%	2.9	30.5%
2004	52.9	9.9	18.8%	2.8	27.9%
2008	53.0	10.9	20.5%	2.7	24.7%
2014	53.8	11.8	21.9%	2.4	17.7%
2022	53.9	11.6	21.4%	2.5	21.5%

* Numbers are given in the millions.

** Emergent bilinguals here are those designated by the federal government as English learners. They are those who speak languages other than English at home and who speak English less than very well.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 1979, 1989, 1995, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau (2008, 2014, 2022b) ACS 1-year estimates, Table C16004 (2022a).

LOTEs and at home who were proficient in English, and thus considered fluent bilinguals, grew even more. That is, in 1979 there were 3.8 million students speaking LOTEs at home, of whom 1.3 million spoke English less than very well; thus 2.5 million students could be considered fluent bilinguals. In 2022 there were 11.6 million students speaking LOTEs at home of whom 2.5 million spoke English less than very well; thus 9.1 million could be considered fluent bilinguals. In short, from 1979 to 2022 the increase in the number of students who spoke a LOTE at home but who were fluent bilinguals was a staggering 264%.

Certainly, the growth in the number of bilingual English-proficient students is greater than that of emergent bilinguals considered English learners, making bilingualism a central educational topic for teachers of *all* U.S. students, not just those who are learning English, since about one out of every four 5- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. speaks a language other than English at home, and of those only one out of four reports that they speak English less than very well. It is also important to remember that any ranking less than “very well” does not simply imply that these students cannot speak English at all, for the other choices are “well” and “less than well,” besides “not at all.”

Although the growing bilingual student population is an important resource in a globalized world, our focus in this book is on minoritized emergent bilinguals because their bilingualism is a consequential resource for them and their families, which is too often devalued by others. Thus, these are also the students who need the most support from the educational system. We warn, however, that as García

(2006) noted, English learners are “only the tail of the elephant”—2.5 million of the 11.6 million bilingual and multilingual U.S. students in 2022. When educators and policymakers use the term *bilingual students* to refer only to the elephant’s tail, or those students who are not yet proficient in English, they lose sight of the incredible potential of the millions of multilingual students in this country. Focusing narrowly on the beginning points of the bilingual continuum blinds them to the strength and potential of bilingualism. This makes all bilingualism suspect for policy and practice, when, instead, being bilingual/multilingual is becoming the norm for students in an increasingly multilingual United States.

HOW ARE THEY DESIGNATED AS ENGLISH LEARNERS?

The question of how many emergent bilinguals there are has to do with the ways in which they are designated and then reclassified as a specific category of student. Unlike other categories of identification such as ethnicity, race, and gender, the EL classification is fluid—that is, students move in and out of being classified according to their progress. And we emphasize that being classified as an English learner or reclassified as a “fluent English speaker” is based on a cutoff score that sometimes has little relationship to the actual performances of these students in school tasks.

Since the 1970s, based on federal civil rights legislation and federal case law, states have had to identify emergent bilinguals and ensure that their schools serve them (Linguanti, 2001). Guidance from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice in January 2015 reminded schools of their obligation to “identify English learner students in a timely, valid and reliable manner” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). ESSA requires that emergent bilinguals be identified 30 days after the beginning of a school year, or two weeks after enrollment if students enter during the school year. But the criteria used to identify emergent bilinguals continue to vary by state and sometimes even by districts within a state (Linguanti & Cook, 2013; Rafa et al., 2020).

Because so many studies have pointed to the variations across states in ways of identifying those classified as English learners, the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2015b) published a set of guidelines to ensure the adequacy of identification and classification. In addition, also in 2015, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) published an “English Learner Toolkit,” providing guidance on how to identify English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

An initial step in identifying students as ELs usually takes place when students first register for a new school: They are given a *home language survey*, which contains questions for students’ parents or guardians about the language used at home by students and others. But as Bailey and Kelly (2013) have demonstrated, states vary in what is asked in the home language survey. Almost half the states have a single form and mandate its use in schools statewide; other states, however, allow school districts to create their own surveys.

Home language surveys tend to view bilingualism through a monolingual lens and ignore the complexity of linguistic practices of multilingual populations. For example, many states’ and schools’ home language surveys ask which was the first language the student learned, ignoring the fact that many students are simultaneous bilinguals, growing up in homes with complex language practices where members of families use their multilingual repertoire flexibly. The surveys also often ask which language is spoken to the child in the home, overlooking the bilingual/multilingual practices of parents and caregivers when interacting with one another and their children. Because there is no label and/or identification process in the home language survey that accurately reflects bilingual students’ language practices, sometimes bilingual students, even those fluent in English, may still be classified as English learners if their families indicate that a LOTE is spoken at home.

Home language surveys may result in highly inaccurate data as parents’ responses reflect decisions that are influenced by their context. For example, in states with English-only policies that restrict designated English learners’ access to bilingual programs, like Arizona and formerly California and Massachusetts (up until 2016), parents may mark English as the home language in order to secure opportunities for bilingual education (Darriet & Santibañez, 2024). In contrast, in other places where dual-language programs may be gentrifying (meaning that English speakers begin to outnumber speakers of the other language) and therefore have to prioritize the enrollment of English learners, English speakers or bilingual families may indicate that a LOTE is used at home in order to get a place in the program.

Moreover, because of the monolingual bias in many states’ home language surveys and the stigmatization that often follows a student’s designation as an English learner, many bilingual parents hide their bilingualism, refusing to acknowledge their home bilingual practices. The construction of inferiority that accompanies being categorized as an emergent bilingual in many schools means that some parents prefer to say that the child only speaks English.

While we are not saying that these strategies are the most common responses to home language surveys, being aware of them helps us recognize that the current practices to identify ELs mask important nuances and even families’ strategic moves in attempts to counter restrictive language policies or stigma.

Students identified by the home language survey as potentially needing services are then referred for an English language proficiency assessment (Rafa et al., 2020). More than half the states use a screener or placement test for identification as English learner. Of these, the majority use a screener test for designation developed by WIDA (no longer an acronym), which is a consortium of state departments of education that designs standards and assessments for English learners.

Some states, however, use their own screening assessment. At the time of this writing, California, for example, uses the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). New York has developed the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL). Still other states provide their school districts with a list of tests from which the districts can select. The National Research Council’s (2011) report concludes the section on the identification of English learners by saying:

Because of the differing state policies, practices, and criteria for initially identifying students as linguistic minority and for classifying them as an English language learner (ELL), individuals who are classified as ELL students in one state may not be classified as ELL students in another. In states that permit local control, students classified as ELL in one district may not be classified as ELL in another district in that state. (p. 86)

In conclusion, school districts classify students as English learners through a combination of information on the home language survey and formal assessment or screening. The home language survey, although designed to ensure language support for students who need it, has unfortunately become a highly outdated tool. It forces bilingual children into monolingual categories, requiring them to identify as either English speakers or speakers of another language, but not both. This approach fails to acknowledge the fluid language practices of bilingual students. To offer beneficial instruction that leverages students' bilingual abilities, schools must change the negative perceptions of speakers of languages other than English and dispel the mistaken belief that bilingualism is rare among students or that EL classification equates to perpetual underperformance (Flores & Lewis, 2022). García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) include a Bilingual Student Identification and Profile instrument that teachers can adapt to ensure that families identify their home language practices with pride.

HOW ARE THEY RECLASSIFIED AS FLUENT ENGLISH SPEAKERS?

Equally important to the question of how many students are designated as emergent bilinguals in U.S. public schools is the question of how these students get reclassified as English proficient. Even though *language proficiency* is the focus for designation as English learner, *academic achievement in English* is key to students' reclassification as English proficient (Linquanti, 2001). This means that the assessment used for the reclassification process should be much more complex because multiple dimensions of communicative competence have to be considered (Bachman, 2001; Canale & Swain, 1980). In other words, to be reclassified, students must not only be able to comprehend and communicate effectively but also do cognitively demanding work in the content areas at the appropriate grade level in English (Bachman, 2002; Linquanti, 2001).

One of the advances toward the educational equity of emergent bilinguals made since No Child Left Behind (more in Chapter 3) has been the requirement that states develop English language proficiency standards for emergent bilinguals, as well as an assessment instrument aligned to these standards that measure listening, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension. In addition, grants have been made available to develop, validate, and implement such assessments. As a result, the states' English language proficiency tests used in reclassification of students have improved dramatically, although there still is much room for improvement.

Furthermore, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and mathematics released in 2010 (more on this in Chapter 3) led to efforts to develop standards for English learners, as well as for assessment systems.

The WIDA consortium of states, which at the time of this writing includes 42 states, territories, and federal agencies, has built a standards-based, criterion-referenced English language proficiency test for reclassification (ACCESS for ELs). WIDA continues to refine its comprehensive and balanced technology-based assessment system for English learners and provides standards-based resources and professional learning to member states. The other smaller consortium is ELPA21 (English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century), which includes nine states at the time of this writing. ELPA21's assessment system consists of a screener to assess baseline English language proficiency, as well as a summative assessment. Both consortia have alternate assessments for ELs with disabilities.

Some states, which together account for the largest populations of English learners in the country, have not joined consortia; they use other English proficiency tests. In 2022, some of the "big states" with large numbers of emergent bilinguals used their own assessments for English language proficiency: California—California English Language Development Test (CELDT); Texas—Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment (TELPAS); New York—New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT); and Arizona—Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA).

Not all tests focus on the same skill domains or weigh each skill domain equally. For example, California's CELDT assigns equal weights to listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, ACCESS for ELLs weighs its overall composite in favor of literacy. As a result, students reclassified in one state would not be considered reclassified in another state.

On average, emergent bilinguals are reclassified three years after school entry, in second grade (Slama, 2014). Reclassification rates are lowest in kindergarten through second grade as well as in grade 9, the grade levels when many emergent bilinguals enter the U.S. school system for the first time. A longitudinal study of reclassification rates in the Los Angeles Unified School District confirmed that reclassification occurred between four to seven years of enrollment. However, one-fourth of students had not been reclassified after nine years in the district (Thompson, 2015).

An important finding is that Spanish-speaking emergent bilinguals are reclassified at half the rate of those who speak other languages, even after controlling for income (Slama, 2014). That is, emergent bilinguals who speak Spanish are twice as likely as those who speak other languages to remain categorized as English learners. There may be many reasons why this is so, but it might be important to consider causes that have to do with what some scholars call *raciolinguistic ideologies* (see Flores & Rosa, 2015). Language and race have been mutually constitutive, with language used to construct race, and ideas about race being shaped by language (Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016). In the United States, Spanish-speaking students have traditionally been considered non-white. The Spanish language has been used often as a proxy for race, a way to segregate and exclude the minoritized Spanish-speaking students from rich educational opportunities. For instance, Flores and Lewis (2022) highlight the raciolinguistic ideology embedded within California's EL reclassification policy, impacting the state's largest population of English learners,

who are primarily Spanish speakers. In their 2023 study, the authors noted that a California state education leader critiqued the expectation that English learners not only demonstrate proficiency on the state English Language Proficiency assessment but also on the state English Language Arts (ELA) assessment and other content areas depending on the district. This dual requirement sets a higher bar for achieving full English proficiency. Flores and Lewis argue that by linking academic performance measures to English proficiency assessments, the state perpetuates a raciolinguistic ideology. This ideology casts doubt on racialized bilingual individuals' linguistic capabilities, fearing misclassification if such criteria are not met. Under this framework, academically struggling students classified as "never-ELs," that is, those who have never been classified as ELs and have not received language services, may be seen as proficient language users, while those labeled as ELs may not receive the same benefit of the doubt. Moreover, California's reclassification criteria also involve teachers' evaluations, which may be influenced by raciolinguistic perspectives of their students.

The failure to provide an equitable, rigorous, and consistent education to emergent bilinguals results in much academic failure. Despite excellent English proficiency, many students are unable to pass English proficiency exams for reclassification because these exams rely heavily on reading and writing skills. The number of students who are designated as English learners for more than six years has increased over time, leading to the creation of another subgroup of emergent bilinguals known as long-term English learners (LTEL) (Chang-Bacon, 2021; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012; Olsen, 2014). They represent one-fourth of all emergent bilinguals. This points to the failure of the U.S. education system to provide a meaningful and equitable education to these students, as well as problematic reclassification policies, often stemming from the system's refusal to see their bilingualism as a resource for learning. With EL assessments increasingly emphasizing academic language mastery, the rising number of students identified as long-term English learners (LTELs) comes as little surprise.

Reclassification of English learners is as problematic as identification. On the whole, reclassification criteria are left up to states and school districts, although they must be based on test scores. But as we have seen, assessment systems and reclassification criteria differ widely.

WHERE DO THEY LIVE AND GO TO SCHOOL?

Nine states accounted for more than two-thirds of the emergent bilingual population in the United States in 2022. They are, ranging from highest to lowest emergent bilingual population: California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, Washington, Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina. These states all had over 100,000 students classified as English learners. Table 2.3 gives the number of public school emergent bilinguals in 2020 in these nine states, as well as the percentage of students they represent (U.S. DoE, IES, NCES, 2020). When the second edition of this book was published, neither Georgia nor Virginia were among the top states.

Table 2.3. Number of Public-School Emergent Bilinguals (EBLs), Fall 2020 (States With More Than 100K EBLs)

State	Number	% of EBLs among students
California	1,062,264	17.7%
Texas	1,034,543	20.1%
Florida	264,546	9.7%
New York	239,954	9.4%
Illinois	218,480	12.0%
Washington	129,564	11.8%
Georgia	125,963	7.5%
Virginia	117,553	9.6%
North Carolina	114,901	7.7%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a. Table 204.20, fall 2000 through fall 2020. EL students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by state.

Emergent bilingual students make up a large proportion of the total pre-K to 12 population in several other states, even if their actual numbers there are not as large as in these nine states. In 2020, Texas had the greatest proportion of students designated as English learners in the country (20.1%), followed by California (17.7%). In fact, the Texas EL population jumped by almost 80% between 2012 and 2020, whereas California's enrollment of ELs decreased from 39% to 22% in the same period (OELA, August 2022). These two states are followed by states whose numbers do not exceed 100,000 (and thus do not appear in Table 2.3) but whose proportions are sizable: New Mexico (16.0%), Nevada (13.3%), Rhode Island (12.2%), District of Columbia (12.0%), Alaska (11.0%), Delaware (10.7%), Colorado (10.5%), Maryland (10.3%), and Massachusetts (10.2%). This is also a change from the numbers reported in the second edition of this book, for students classified as English learners are now present in more states. The greatest *growth* in the number of students who are developing English proficiency in the past decade has occurred clearly outside the nine top states in population.

In previous years, the majority of designated English learners tended to be enrolled in public schools in urban areas, but there was a shift in 2021 (NCES, 2024). While cities still enrolled about 1.5 million emergent bilinguals, most emergent bilinguals were found in suburban areas (1.6 million). In contrast, about 742,000 emergent bilinguals were enrolled in towns and rural areas.

In 2022–2023, the Los Angeles Unified School District had the largest number of students classified as English learners (145,983), constituting 22.6% of the Los Angeles school population. But if we consider the proportion of EL designated students in school districts, Santa Ana Unified School District in California leads in the proportion of English learners in their student body (45.3%). Santa Ana

is followed by four Texas school districts—Dallas Independent School District (38.7%), Houston Independent School District (36%), Aldine Independent School District (29.9%), and Fort Worth Independent School District (28.6%). These four Texas districts were then followed by Denver County School District in Colorado (27.7%), Houston (26.6%), Austin (24.6%), San Diego (24.1%), Los Angeles (22.6%), and Fairfax, Virginia (20.2%) (U.S. Department of Education, IES, NCES, 2020). The state of Texas's five school districts constitute the greatest proportion of English learners.

Despite the spread of emergent bilinguals across the United States, they seem to be concentrated in fewer than half the school districts in the country. In 2015, 46% of English learners were enrolled in school districts where ELs comprised over 20% of the school population; that is, they tend to go to school with a large number of peers who are also English learners (U.S. DoE, 2020a). This points to the high degree of racial and linguistic segregation in the United States (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Furthermore, the level of linguistic segregation in the United States has risen steadily (Frankenberg et al., 2019).

Notably, the school choice movement that has led to the expansion of charter schools has also influenced EL student enrollment. For example, in Texas, the percentage of ELs in charter schools nearly doubled from 16 percent in 2016 to just under 30 percent in 2021. During this time, the overall enrollment in charter schools in Texas also more than doubled. As a result, the number of English learners in Texas charter schools has increased fivefold over the past decade, rising from under 25,000 in 2010 to almost 120,000 in 2021 (Carlson, 2023). Nationally, there has also been an upward but less drastic trend of EL enrollment in charter schools, rising from 9% in 2011–2012 to 11% in 2017–2018 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

WHAT LANGUAGES DO THEY SPEAK?

Emergent bilinguals in the United States are speakers of many different languages, although Spanish remains by far the language spoken by the highest number of them. The National Center for Education Statistics of the Institute of Education (2024) reports that in fall 2021, 76.4% of those students designated as English learners spoke Spanish at home. One of the limitations of the ways in which the census gathers language data is that the heterogeneity of language groups is erased. Many Native American languages are not accounted for. Immigrants from Latin America are speakers of the many Indigenous languages of the Americas. And yet, they have no way to name these languages in the census except by claiming to be Spanish speakers, when Spanish is often a language that they have learned in school but that does not reflect their linguistic practices at home (Martínez, 2017).

According to the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), Arabic is the second language most spoken by emergent bilingual students (2.5% of the population in 2020). In 2018, Arabic was the second most spoken language by emergent bilinguals in 16 states and was among the five most common languages in 39 states

(Bialik, Scheller, & Waler, 2018). In Michigan, over a quarter of all emergent bilinguals (26.3%) speak Arabic (OELA, 2023).

Arabic is followed surprisingly by English (2.2%). The fact that so many students designated as English learners speak English at home is important to note. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) gives the following example as a reason for this claim: “[S]tudents who live in multilingual households and students adopted from other countries who were raised speaking another language but currently live in households where English is spoken” (Table 1, footnote 2). However, the fact that so many students designated as ELs speak English at home is another indication of the complexity of language practices in the homes of emergent bilinguals. It also accounts for the change in immigration that has brought many bilingual English-speaking students from Africa and Asia to the United States.

English as a home language of emergent bilinguals is then followed by Chinese, representing fourth place and 1.8% of students who are classified as English learners. It is important, however, to understand that this group is also linguistically heterogeneous, with most speaking Mandarin, but many also speaking Cantonese and other Chinese languages, such as Fuzhounese, Wu, Hokkien, and Hakka. In 2018, Chinese was among the five most common languages in 32 states. West Virginia has the greatest percentage of English learners who speak Chinese (9.9%), followed by New York (9.2%).

Vietnamese then follows, representing 1.4% of all emergent bilinguals in the United States. Other languages spoken at home by more than 25,000 students who are English learners include Portuguese (1%), Russian (0.7%), Haitian/Haitian Creole (0.6%), Hmong (.06%), and Urdu (0.5%).

Table 2.4 provides the distribution of the languages other than English spoken by students in the United States, including those who are emergent bilinguals, according to calculations from the U.S. Census¹ (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS, 2022). It shows the number of youth (ages 5 to 17) who speak a language other than English at home, as well as those who speak English less than very well and are considered emergent bilinguals. The table also shows the percentage of emergent bilinguals speaking a given language group compared to others. In addition, the last column of the table shows the percentages within each language group who are emergent bilinguals.

Despite the fact that the greatest proportion of emergent bilinguals as shown in Table 2.4 is Spanish speaking (69.0%), it is important to point out that, proportionately, Spanish-speaking youth are *not* less proficient in English than other groups. In fact, the proportion of speakers of Asian/Pacific languages who speak English less than very well (23.6%) is greater than that of the Spanish-speaking group (22.5%).

Spanish is the leading language of emergent bilinguals in all but five states, where other languages dominate: Alaska (Yup'ik), Hawai'i (Iloko), Maine (Somali), Montana (German), and Vermont (Nepali) (U.S. DoE, 2018). Maine and Vermont have large settlements of Somali and Nepali refugees. Yup'ik is a major indigenous language in Alaska. Iloko is the language spoken among most Filipino immigrants to Hawai'i. Most surprisingly, the variety of German spoken by the Hutterites, a religious group in Montana, is the leading home language of emergent bilinguals in that state.

Table 2.4. Numbers and Percentages of Languages Spoken by Emergent Bilinguals (EBLs), 5 to 17 Years Old

Language group	Number of LOTE speakers	Number of EBLs	% of all EBLs	% of EBLs within language group
Spanish	7,972,525	1,789,893	69.0%	22.5%
Indo-European ²	1,680,851	384,057	15.09%	22.9%
Asian/Pacific ³	1,255,736	296,250	11.0%	23.6%
Other	662,489	125,101	5.0%	18.9%
Total	11,571,601	2,595,301	100.00%	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2022, one-year estimate, Table C16004.

WHAT ARE THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS?

Ethnicity/Race and Socioeconomic Status

When we look at racial or ethnic classifications according to the categories of the U.S. Census,⁴ emergent bilinguals are overwhelmingly Hispanic or Latino (78.1%). Asians account for 10.6% of the emergent bilingual population, whereas whites account for 5.8% and Blacks for 3.5%. There are also many emergent bilinguals who are categorized in the census as American Indians and Pacific Islanders, although their numbers pale in comparison to those of the other racial or ethnic categories. Although the U.S. Census allows self-identification of two or more races, this also makes little sense, for example, to people of Latin American ancestry who have learned to think of themselves as mestizo or mulato or simply *mezclao* (mixed) and whose complex racial background has been erased for generations. And yet, among the foreign-born English learners who consider themselves Black, 57% are from Latin America, pointing to a greater consciousness of the racial categories in the United States (OELA, March 2020).

There is much more racial and linguistic heterogeneity among emergent bilinguals than ever. For example, among emergent bilinguals who are counted as French speakers, we now find students from all over West Africa who are multilingual. The Africans arriving in the United States have brought their many languages (and their various multilingual practices), the most numerous being Ibo, Yoruba, Kru, Amharic, Cushite, Swahili, Bantu languages, Fulani, and Mande. And among emergent bilinguals from the Indian subcontinent, we find not only students who speak Hindi and Urdu but also substantial numbers of speakers of Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Telugu, Malayalam, and Tamil, who are also multilingual. In addition, emergent bilingual students in large numbers are found among Native Americans, especially Navajo (Diné) but also Yup'ik, Keres Pueblo people, Yaqui, Apache, Cherokee, Choctaw, Dakota, Ojibwa, and others.

Turning now to the socioeconomic characteristics of emergent bilinguals, *Statista* (2019) reported that 31.9% of students who lived below the poverty threshold did not speak English at home. However, 20.9% of those who lived above the poverty threshold also did not speak English at home. This great variance in socioeconomic status among emergent bilinguals was also noted by Quintero and Hansen (2021), who found that only 37% of students classified as ELs come from households with low socioeconomic status. The profile of the emergent bilingual student has changed drastically from 2003, when Zehler and colleagues (2003) estimated that 75% of English learners lived in poverty. This is an important finding, for bilingualism in the United States and the development of English language and literacy is not limited to children of poor parents but also includes children of middle-class parents.

It is also important to note other social categories where English learners are overrepresented. Although emergent bilinguals make up only 10% of the total student population, they are overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness (16%), and they are more likely to experience homelessness in urban settings (OELA, February 2022). English learners are also overrepresented in the migratory population and among emergent bilinguals labeled as disabled (Cioè-Peña, 2021). In 2017–2018, 11.2% of students identified with disabilities were English learners (OELA, August 2021). Notably, English learners were overrepresented in the categories of specific learning disability (12.3% percentage points higher than other students), speech or language impairment (2.0% higher), and intellectual disability (0.5% higher) (OELA, August 2021).

Gender and Age Distribution

According to Office for Civil Rights data (U.S. Department of Education and Office for Civil Rights, 2024), slightly more than half of emergent bilinguals in the nation's schools identify as male (54%), with just less than half as female (46%).

Emergent bilingual students in the United States are younger than the average pre-K–12 student and thus clustered more in elementary schools. In the fall of 2020, for instance, 57% of all emergent bilingual students were in K through grade 3, and only 27% were enrolled at the grade 9–12 high school level. Moving higher up in the grades, we find that the number of emergent bilinguals decreases.

The drop in the number of emergent bilinguals as we move up the grades reflects two important trends. On the one hand, at the elementary level, the change points to the success of educators in moving emergent bilinguals along the bilingual continuum, so that they can test out of the English learner classification. But the reasons for the decline in the numbers of emergent bilinguals in high school should be interrogated. The decline might reveal the high dropout rate in this age group, as well as the secondary schools' policies of pushing out students who might not succeed in the standardized tests and graduation exit exams that are required so that schools can claim success. We return to this issue in later chapters.

Nativity

Despite popular perceptions, emergent bilinguals are by no means all immigrants or foreign born. Zong and Batalova (2015a) report that 77% of emergent bilinguals are *U.S. born*. In prekindergarten to 5th grade this proportion is even greater at 85% (Zong & Batalova, 2015b). The high number of American-born children who enter U.S. schools and are designated as English learners points to the increased multilingualism in the United States. American children are increasingly growing up in homes where English is not the only language spoken. Bilingualism is not a *foreign* phenomenon. It is an American sociolinguistic reality, chosen by many who see it as important to family and community life. The fact that U.S. schools do not understand the value of bilingualism to families points to how out of touch they are with their communities.

At the middle and high school levels, U.S.-born students still account for 57% of all students designated as ELs (Grantmakers for Education, 2013). This has to do with three factors—the complex nature of immigration and family settlement, the presence of individual disability, and the failure of our school system to meaningfully educate emergent bilinguals.

The complex nature of immigration and families today refers to the fact that, although in the past children born in the United States have also grown up in the United States, travel across national borders is currently more frequent. And this is not only happening with migrant rural families. Urban families are increasingly moving back and forth across borders, and their U.S.-born children often end up also being schooled in languages other than English. Additionally, many families send their U.S.-born children to live with grandparents in other countries while they work long hours in the United States. Only when the children are older and able to care for themselves do they return to live with their parents.

Many of the U.S.-born children who remain emergent bilinguals after middle school have language disabilities. Some students who are designated as emergent bilinguals when they enter school are afterward referred for evaluation to receive special education services. Because they have been designated as English learners, they then have to pass the state's exam—which assesses performance in listening, speaking, reading, and writing—for reclassification as English fluent. Despite being quite fluent in English, many students with disabilities cannot be reclassified because of poor scores on exams that have been normed on students without disabilities. Therefore, their designation as English learners and later as long-term English learners travels with them throughout their education.

The majority of emergent bilinguals who are born in the United States (77%) are the children of immigrants or have at least one immigrant parent (Zong & Batalova, 2015a, 2015b). Although some may continue to speak languages other than English at home, this fact does not explain why so many others continue to be designated English learners when, in fact, they may not speak anything but English.

On the other end of the spectrum are *foreign-born emergent bilinguals*. They vary in the number of years they have been in the United States, but most have been in the United States for less than five years (Zehler et al., 2003). It is difficult to

determine the number of foreign-born emergent bilinguals who are refugees, temporary sojourners,⁵ or migrant workers.⁶

The U.S. foreign-born population was approximately 14.1% of the U.S. population in 2021 (Passel & Krogstad, 2023). In 2023, the top six countries of immigrant origin to the United States were Mexico (24%), India (6%), China (5%), the Philippines (5%), El Salvador, (3%) and Vietnam (3%) (Schumacker et al., 2023). Of the 46.2 million immigrants in the United States in 2022, approximately one-fourth (10.5 million) were undocumented. The number of undocumented immigrants has remained mostly stable since 2017 (Passel & Krogstad, 2023).

Of those immigrants who were documented, approximately half are naturalized citizens or permanent residents. A total of 2.3 million are refugees or asylum seekers, and in 2023, 43% of refugees were from Africa, 28% from the Middle East and South Asia, 13% from East Asia, 11% from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 4% from Europe and Central Asia. The top origin countries for refugees in 2023 were the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, and Syria (Ward & Batalova, 2023). Finally, 1.5 million immigrants had legal temporary status (mostly foreign students and temporary workers). But we know little of how these figures relate to students enrolled in schools.

Some foreign-born students, mostly from the middle class, come to the United States from well-resourced schools and often have had some instruction in English. But other foreign-born students come from societies torn by war and poverty, where the educational system has declined or collapsed. Some come from poor rural communities where it has been difficult to go to school consistently. These students have minimal literacy in their home language. For them, achieving proficiency in the ways of using English for academic tasks is a struggle because they have little familiarity with these tasks.

In particular, migrant students, those whose families work seasonally in agriculture or fisheries across the United States, face significant marginalization in the educational system. While about half of migratory agricultural workers are U.S. citizens or have visas, 47% of them are considered “unauthorized” (NCFH, 2018). This undocumented status, coupled with their transient living conditions, exacerbates their precarious circumstances. For these children and their families, the demands of English language proficiency, intensive academic engagement, and active parental involvement in school clash with their daily realities, creating severe challenges and exclusion (Free & Križ, 2022).

We know that approximately 1.1 million to 1.6 million students under the age of 18 are undocumented immigrants (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova et al., 2008; Zong & Batalova, 2015a). As of 2018, approximately 6.1 million U.S.-citizen children lived with an undocumented family member, and between 2011 and 2013, up to half a million U.S.-citizen children experienced the deportation of at least one parent (American Immigration Council, 2021). While we do not know how many of these students are emergent bilinguals, we do know that a child's risk of mental health issues like depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, PTSD, and more increases after a parent's detention or deportation (Lovato, 2019; Rojas-Flores et al., 2017). This toxic stress impacts students' daily

life, including their academic, social, and linguistic performance in school. While mixed status and deportation are often viewed as taboo in schools, attending to the socioemotional ramifications is essential. The education of undocumented students in K–12 classrooms was guaranteed by the Supreme Court in 1982, when it ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that a K–12 education is a fundamental and protected right that needs to be provided to all students, regardless of citizenship or residency status.

Unaccompanied minors are immigrants under 18 years of age who have no lawful immigration status and no parent or legal guardian in the United States. The number of unaccompanied minors who have come into the United States has increased significantly since 2012, when there was a total of 13,625 unaccompanied minors. In 2023, there were 118,938 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024a). In 2023, the unaccompanied minors received were from Guatemala (42%), Honduras (28%), El Salvador (9%), Mexico, (8%), and other countries (13%). The states into which they were released to sponsors tells the story of the changing demographics of the United States. From October 2023 to February 2024, as expected, Texas received the most unaccompanied minors (6,916), followed by Florida (5,349) and California (5,276). These states were followed by New York (3,440), and then surprisingly by Georgia (2,343), New Jersey (2,079), and Tennessee (2,042) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024b).

It is imperative to understand that, although important, the education of emergent bilinguals is not just about immigrant or refugee education alone. As we have said, according to the Migration Policy Institute, 82% of English learners in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade were born in the United States (Corey, 2016) and are native-born U.S. citizens.

HOW DO THEY USE LANGUAGE?

The U.S. Census Bureau only asks families about spoken English, but what is at issue for educational attainment is the ability to complete academic work, which requires written, along with spoken, proficiency. Therefore, relying on census figures may be misleading and may underestimate the population of students who are emergent bilinguals.

Estimates of the percentage of emergent bilinguals who can use their home language in complex academic tasks vary, but school coordinators report that between one-fourth to one-third of these students nationwide have lower levels of literacy in their home language compared to what might be expected of students going to school in a country where it is the language of schooling. This fact should be of vital importance to those who coordinate and plan for the education of these students because it turns out that the benefits of what is known as linguistic transfer of literacy skills from one language to another will not be enjoyed completely by emergent bilinguals who are not familiar with literacy practices for academic purposes in what is considered their home language.

Many emergent bilinguals struggle with literacy in their home language, particularly secondary school students categorized as students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) or students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). It has been estimated that between 11% and 20% of emergent bilinguals in middle schools and high schools have missed more than two years of schooling since the age of six (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). This group also has very high dropout rates, with estimates as high as 75% at the secondary level (Montero, Newmaster, & Ledger et al., 2014). Furthermore, even students who have consistently attended school in their countries of origin have often learned to use language for literacy purposes that are very different from those literacies required by U.S. schools (Yip, 2016; more on this in Chapter 4).

WHO ARE THE LATINE EMERGENT BILINGUALS?

Because Spanish-speaking students make up the majority of emergent bilinguals in the United States, we pay special attention to them in this book. We start by contextualizing our use of the term *Latine* in this book to refer to them, when up to now we have used the terms preferred by government agencies and much scholarship—*Latino/a* or *Hispanic*. In 1970, the U.S. Census used the term *Hispanic* for the first time, although much of the population of Latin American origin in the United States preferred the term *Latino/a*. In 1997, the census expanded the category to “Hispanic or Latino origin,” legitimizing the use of the word *Latino*. At the same time, a battle was brewing over who was included as Latino and whether the masculine ending “o” was gender normative. The alternatives—*Latino/a* or *Latin@*, introduced by many scholars—were not satisfactory for many because the terms reified the gender binary. In the past decade, the term *Latinx*, a gender-neutral alternative to *Latino*, *Latina*, or *Latin@*, has been increasingly used by scholars and the community to include those who are trans or gender nonconfirming. In the second edition of this book, we adopted *Latinx* as our preferred term. Lately, the term *Latine* is being increasingly used by the community itself. In addition to being gender neutral, it has the advantage that it is easier to say in Spanish than *Latinx*. Also, it allows the easier use of plural forms, *Latines*. Because, for us, the act of naming oneself is important, we have adopted the term *Latine* in this edition, except when referring to the work of the government and others who name them differently.

In 2022, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were approximately 63.7 million Latines in the United States, accounting for 19% of the population of the country. It is projected that by 2060 that figure will be 111 million (Statista, 2024). In 2021, there were 14 million Latine students in U.S. schools. Latine students made up 26% of the country's prekindergarten and kindergarten pupils, 26% of elementary school students, and 26% of high school students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Between 2011 and 2021, the school-age Latine population increased in every state, and it is expected to reach 30% by 2030 (Jimenez, K., 2022). The U.S. Census Bureau has forecasted that Latine students will make up a third of the nation's 3- to 17-year-old learners by 2036.

Two of the five largest school districts in the country are Los Angeles County and Miami-Dade County, with 74% and 73% of students respectively being of Latine background.

The Latine population is complex. In 2020, over two-thirds were born in the United States (67%), and the number of U.S.-born Latine people is growing. In 2019, 72% of all Latines ages five and older indicated they spoke English very well. This rise in English proficiency has been accompanied by a decline in the number of Latines who claim to speak Spanish at home. However, there is no doubt that the use of Spanish has more holding power than the traditional three-generation language shift that occurred during the 20th century (Fishman, 1965). In 2022, 94% of Latine immigrants spoke Spanish at home, the same rate as in 1980 (Funk & López, 2022).

The Latine group also represents many national origin groups, although in 2020 almost two-thirds are considered Mexicans (62%), either because they were born in Mexico or they trace their ancestors' roots to Mexico. Puerto Ricans constituted the second largest group (9.7% of the Latine population in 2020), and Cubans, Salvadorans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, Colombians, and Hondurans each had a population of around a million. Nevertheless, the fastest growing origin group is now Venezuelan. From 2010 to 2019, the Venezuelan population grew by 126%, whereas the Mexican population only grew 13% over the same period (Funk & López, 2022).

Regardless of where Latine people have settled and the sociohistorical circumstances of their settlement, U.S. schools have rarely built upon their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; see also Chapter 8) or used pedagogy that leverages and sustains their cultural practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Speaking specifically about the importance of leveraging Latine cultural and linguistic practices in their education, Pedraza and Rivera (2005) use the image of *sankofa*, a Swahili word that refers to going back to the source, and suggest that it is important for Latine students to explore their "historical, sociocultural and familial traditions and legacies" (p. 234). The education system's lack of attention to Latine students' sociohistorical context has resulted in these students not faring well in U.S. schools (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

In 2021, there was a total of more than 13 million Latine students in U.S. elementary and secondary schools (Fabina et al., 2023). The sheer number of Mexican-origin students makes them the group with the most Spanish-speaking students, as well as the group with the most emergent bilinguals. Mexicans are, however, neither the group that speaks Spanish the most at home nor the group that has the most emergent bilinguals, comparatively speaking. The Latine national groups with the highest percentages of students who are emergent bilinguals are the following: Honduran (17.3%), Salvadoran (17.1%), Guatemalan (16.7%), Paraguayan (16.7%), Dominican (16.6%), Venezuelan (15.6%), Mexican (13.2%), and Ecuadorean (12.6%) (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2015).

Latine immigrant students account for more than half (58%) of all immigrant youth in the United States, and more of these students are in the upper grades than in the lower grades. Despite the lack of data on undocumented immigrant students, we know that many Latine immigrant students are undocumented or are

the children of undocumented immigrants, since about three-quarters (76%) of undocumented immigrants are of Latine origin (Passel & Cohn, 2009).

One of the most alarming facts about Latine emergent bilinguals is their high dropout rate of 7.8% compared to 4.1% for white English learners. This dropout rate is only superseded by that of Native Americans who are English learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Clearly, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers must redouble their energies toward better serving Latine students, who constitute the overwhelming proportion of the emergent bilingual population.

EDUCATING EMERGENT BILINGUALS: KNOWING WHO THEY ARE

Despite the differences among emergent bilinguals that we have identified in this chapter, a few generalizations can be gleaned from our prior discussion:

- Their numbers are increasing overall, but so is the number of fluent bilingual students.
- There are discrepancies regarding how they are identified and reclassified among state and local educational authorities.
- Most are racialized as non-white, and of those approximately one-third are poor.
- Most live in urban areas and attend under-resourced schools that are segregated, although the suburban population has grown in recent years.
- Three out of every four were born in the United States.
- Although approximately half are in elementary schools, the greatest increase in the number of emergent bilinguals is in high school-age students, although many of them do not graduate.
- Most emergent bilinguals are of Latine origin, although there is great linguistic, cultural, and social diversity among the Latine population.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Identify some of the contradictions in counting, classifying, and reclassifying emergent bilinguals. What are some of the inconsistencies in the data?
2. Describe the population of emergent bilinguals in the United States. What do all students have in common?
3. Find out who the emergent bilinguals are in your school district. How many are there? What are their characteristics, and what languages do they speak? How have they been counted? What method is used to identify, classify, and reclassify them?
4. Why is bilingualism a vital topic in the education of *all* children in the United States?