



# Bilingual Education in Quebec: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Abstract

Quebec's current bilingual education system offers cognitive and social benefits (Cummins, 2009, as cited in Marceau, 2016), but implementation challenges persist due to legal constraints, resource shortages, and ideological resistance. While French immersion programs have successfully promoted bilingualism among Anglophones, they have also restricted access to English-language education for immigrants and Indigenous peoples (Crump & Halcomb-Smith, 2022; Marceau, 2016). Furthermore, critics argue that the focus on French-English bilingualism marginalizes Indigenous and immigrant languages, calling for a shift toward plurilingualism (Ahmedova, 2024; Kubota & Bale, 2020). Evaluating the effectiveness and equity of these programs in their own context and in the context of comparable international situations is a necessity if Quebec wants to move into a multilingual, global society. A policy that balances cultural preservation with inclusive multilingual education may be difficult to implement but is the most desirable for student outcomes.

## Introduction

Shaped by its unique linguistic landscape, Quebec's educational system reflects the province's designation of French as the only official language, even within a bilingual federal framework. The province's language policies, such as Bill 101, prioritize the usage of French in all aspects of public life, influencing access to language education and shaping federal bilingual education initiatives. The Charter of the French Language (Bill 101) mandates French as the sole language of instruction in public schools, with limited exceptions for ESL classes. Bilingual education in Quebec primarily manifests through French immersion programs in English-language schools and in bilingual college programs.

Recently, building on Bill 101, Bill 96, passed in 2022, further intensified control over English-language education, including caps on English CEGEP enrollment, mandatory French exit exams for non-historic anglophones, and expanded powers for the Quebecois provincial government to enforce compliance (Crump & Halcomb-Smith, 2022).

Despite the proven cognitive and social benefits of true bilingualism or multilingualism, Quebec faces persistent political, legal, and ideological barriers to implementing English or other language immersion programs. Meanwhile, uneven rates of bilingualism in English-speaking and immigrant communities persist, particularly in those students from poor socioeconomic areas. More recently, some have pushed back on the French language mandates not from the perspective of English-speakers, but rather from that of speakers of other languages, including the languages of indigenous Canadians and immigrants. Authors such as Kubota & Bale (2020) add that plurilingualism could be a better answer to the exclusions offered by many bilingualisms, including those in Canada.

## International Context and Review

Quebec's situation has many similarities to bilingual and multilingual policy battles in former European colonies. A recent study of primary school multilingualism in Tanzania (a nation with 156 languages) focused on teacher's perceptions of the use of Swahili and English across three schools in the Kagera region. The findings of the structured interviews revealed a preference for English over Swahili or the other languages, though teachers generally supported the current policy of teaching only Swahili and English, while acknowledging the cultural significance of ethnic languages acquired outside the school setting. Challenges were similar to Quebec, with resource disparities, insufficient guidance for bilingual instruction, and lack of formal assessment tools. Some teachers demonstrated multilingual awareness but prioritized English and Swahili in classroom strategies (Mutagwaba & Jessner, 2024).

The situation in Quebec is even more similar to the ongoing debate about Catalan and Spanish usage in Catalonia. Laws protecting and promoting Catalan language in education and public life include establishing it as the primary teaching language while ensuring fluency in Spanish. While in Canada, the national government has yielded to the French-language laws of the province of Quebec, the national quota of 25% of minimum Spanish education in schools has conflicted many times with local education (Soler & Erdocia, 2020).

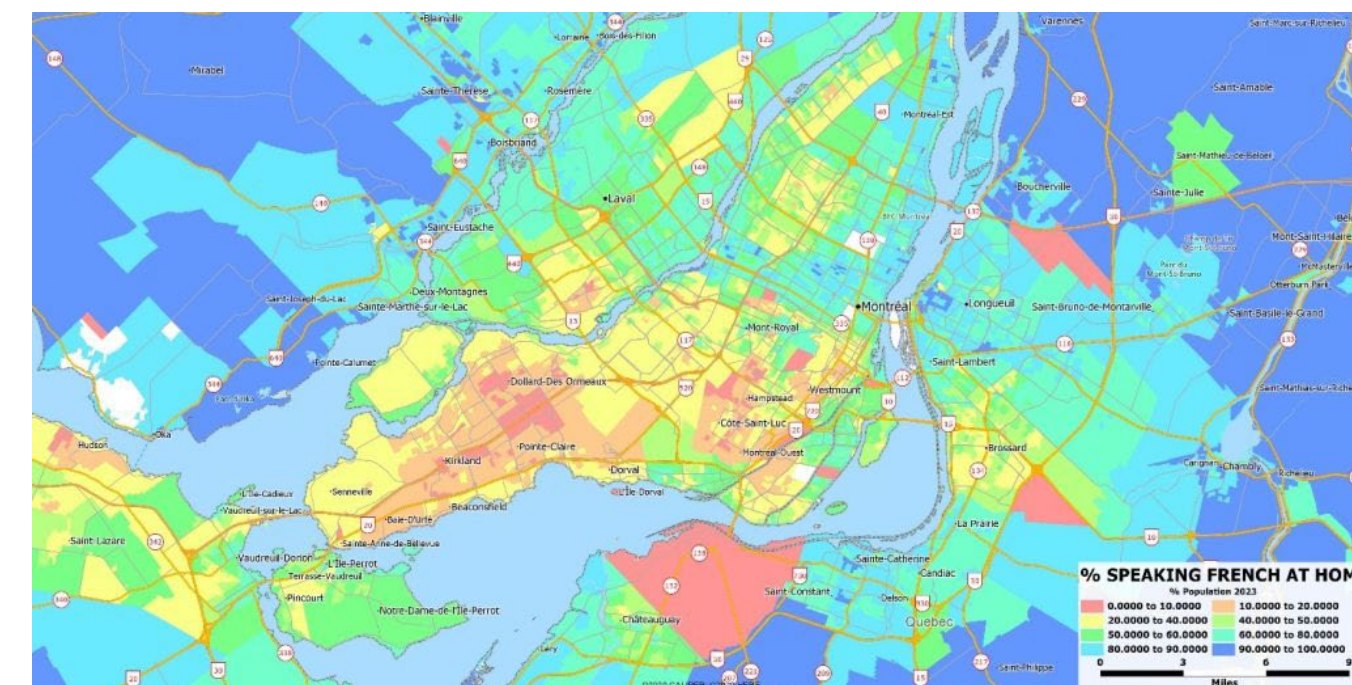
In the rest of Spain, participation in bilingual education programs has been shown to create significantly higher levels of intercultural competence and international mobility. On the other hand, a recent study found no statistically significant differences in self-perceived employability between BE participants and non-participants, suggesting that while BE enhances cultural awareness and willingness to travel abroad, it does not necessarily improve graduates' job prospects. Ultimately, the authors suggest that Spanish BE programs could serve as a model for improving intercultural competence and mobility in educational systems worldwide (Palacios-Hidalgo et al., 2022).

The authors of most reputable studies argued for a more inclusive and equitable approach to language education, recommending policy revisions that would support multilingualism, integrate mother tongues into the curriculum, and provide teacher training for diverse linguistic environments (Ahmedova, 2024; Kubota & Bale, 2020; Mutagwaba & Jessner, 2024; Palacios-Hidalgo et al., 2022; Soler & Erdocia, 2020).

## Results

The current evidence demonstrates that bilingual education benefits all students, including those with learning difficulties. Cummins (2009, as cited in Marceau, 2016) argues that bilingualism enhances first language development rather than hindering it. Research also supports intensive programs over traditional ESL models, with Lightbown (2001, as cited in Marceau, 2016) noting that "shorter periods of concentrated instruction are more effective than drip-feed exposure" (p. 105).

Therefore, programs like the French immersion system instituted in Quebec can be very effective in achieving their goal of producing bilingual speakers. However, challenges persist due to resistance to bilingualism from French speakers, and the language identity categories that result from the program's success. Marceau (2016) concludes that Quebec's resistance to bilingualism stems from ideological and political agendas, advocating for depoliticizing education and embracing bilingualism as a tool for global citizenship. Crump & Halcomb-Smith (2022) also argue that current Quebecois systems reinforce strict language identity categories that do not reflect the linguistic realities of many residents.



A map of French spoken at home (with highest percentage in dark blue) in Montreal shows the reality of non-French speakers in parts of the province. A linguistic study of Montreal (2023). *Applied Geographic*. appliedgeographic.com

## Conclusions

Canada's federal bilingual education system has been effective in promoting bilingualism among English-speaking populations. However, Quebec's emphasis on strict French immersion has created cognitive and social challenges not only for speakers of other languages but also for native French students. Additionally, ongoing issues with access to resources and the structure of provincial laws can marginalize English speakers, Indigenous language communities, and immigrants, making the system less equitable for diverse groups.

To address these concerns, both cultural and legislative reforms could be considered for Quebec's bilingual education policies. Aligning more closely with federal guidelines, eliminating punitive practices, and providing better support for immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous peoples would help create a more inclusive educational environment. Future policy development should strive to balance the preservation of cultural identity with the practical benefits of plurilingual approaches that honor the province's rich linguistic landscape and prepare students for a global future.

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### QUEBEC LANGUAGE POLICY TIMELINE

