

Study: The evolution of English-French bilingualism in Canada from 1961 to 2011

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According to the 2011 Census, 17.5% of the Canadian population, or 5.8 million Canadians, reported being able to conduct a conversation in both English and French. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, this proportion declined slightly for the first time after four successive decades of growth.

In 1961, the English–French bilingualism rate was 12.2%. Subsequently, it rose in every decade to a peak of 17.7% in 2001.

In the last decade, the total population increased faster than the bilingual population for the first time since 1961.

As a result, although the number of bilingual Canadians increased from 5.2 million in 2001 to 5.8 million in 2011, their share as a percentage of the total population declined slightly over the period, from 17.7% to 17.5%.

Bilingualism increasing in Quebec

Between 2001 and 2011, Quebec had the largest increase in the number of individuals who could converse in both English and French.

In 2011, 42.6% of Quebec residents, or 3.3 million people, reported that they were able to conduct a conversation in English and in French. This compared with 40.8% in 2001, or 2.9 million people.

The other province with a higher-than-average rate was New Brunswick, where 33.2% of residents said they could conduct a conversation in the country's two official languages. However, the rate declined by a full percentage point in that province between 2001 and 2011.

Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia had bilingualism rates varying between 10% and 12%. Ontario had the second-largest number of English–French bilingual residents, at 1.4 million.

The Western provinces and Newfoundland and Labrador had the lowest rates. The rate was 8.6% in Manitoba, and varied between 5% and 7% in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

English–French bilingualism was strongly concentrated in regions that have a substantial degree of interaction between Francophones and Anglophones.

Those regions were located in parts of Quebec, New Brunswick and Ontario. In total, 86% of the Canadian bilingual population lived in one of those three provinces in 2011. Back in 1961, the proportion was almost identical (87%).

Bilingualism rates were lower in the vast majority of provinces in 1961. For instance, the proportion of people who were bilingual was 25.5% in Quebec (compared with 42.6% in 2011), 19.0% in New Brunswick (33.2% in 2011), and 7.9% in Ontario (11.0% in 2011).

Decline in the proportion of students learning French

Outside Quebec, the recent slowdown in bilingualism occurred in tandem with two factors: the decline in the proportion of primary and secondary students exposed to French as a second language, and the increase in the number of immigrants.

Between the school years 1991/1992 and 2010/2011, the proportion of primary and secondary students outside Quebec learning French as a second language in a regular public school curriculum declined 24%, from 1.8 million to 1.4 million.



Even though the number of students registered in French-immersion programs rose 28% over the period—from 267,000 in 1991/1992 to 341,000 in 2010/2011—the overall proportion of students exposed to some degree of French in public schools declined from 53% to 44%.

At the same time, the proportion of young (aged 15 to 19) bilingual Anglophones outside Quebec decreased constantly in every census year since 1996.

English–French bilingualism was also influenced by the influx of new immigrants, whose mother tongue is neither English nor French in approximately 80% of cases.

Outside Quebec, immigrants (6%) were less likely than the Canadian-born (11%) to report being able to conduct a conversation in both English and French and thus contributed to the increase in the non-bilingual population.

In Quebec—contrary to elsewhere in the country—the immigrant population contributed to the increase in bilingualism, as immigrants in that province had higher rates of English–French bilingualism (51%) than the Canadian-born (42%).

Note to readers

This article uses data from the 1961 to 2011 censuses, which included questions about the knowledge of official languages. In this article, 'bilingualism' refers to English–French bilingualism, defined as the ability to conduct a conversation in Canada's two official languages.

The article also uses data from the 2011 National Household Survey on immigrant status, age, knowledge of official languages, and mother tongue. Data from the Elementary-Secondary Education Survey were also used to gauge the degree of exposure of Canadian students to the French as a second-language programs in primary and secondary public schools outside Quebec.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers 3901, 5102 and 5178.

The article "The evolution of English-French bilingualism in Canada from 1961 to 2011" is now available online in the May 2013 edition of *Insights on Canadian Society* (75-006-X), from the *Browse by key resource* module of our website under *Publications*.

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