
Census in Brief

English–French bilingualism in Canada: Recent trends after five decades of official bilingualism

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English–French bilingualism in Canada: Recent trends after five decades of official bilingualism

Highlights

- In 2021, nearly one in five people (18.0%) in Canada could have a conversation in English and French, representing close to 6.6 million people. While this proportion has never been this high in a census, it has remained stable compared with 2001 (17.7%).
- In Quebec, the rate of English–French bilingualism rose from 40.8% in 2001 to 46.4% in 2021, while over the same period, it fell from 10.3% to 9.5% in Canada outside Quebec overall. However, the rate of bilingualism in both official languages was increasing in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Yukon and the Northwest Territories.
- The increase in the rate of bilingualism in both official languages in Quebec was driven by two key factors. One factor is the rise in the English–French bilingualism rate of the population with a French mother tongue from 36.6% in 2001 to 42.2% in 2021. The other factor is an increase in the demographic weight of the population with another mother tongue, i.e., a language other than English or French, with just over half of this population (50.8% in 2021) being able to have a conversation in Canada's two official languages.
- Two key drivers are also behind the decrease in the rate of English–French bilingualism observed since 2001 in Canada outside Quebec. The first is the decline in the demographic weight of the French-mother-tongue population, of which a high proportion is proficient enough in both official languages to conduct a conversation (85.3% in 2021). The second is the decline in the English–French bilingualism rate of the population with another mother tongue, which fell from 5.7% in 2001 to 4.7% in 2021.
- In Canada outside Quebec, approximately three in five people (60.8%) who attended a French-language school or a French immersion program could have a conversation in both official languages, compared with 3.5% of those who did not attend these schools or immersion programs.

Introduction

The *Official Languages Act* was adopted in 1969, making English and French Canada's official languages. Official bilingualism is both symbolic and tangible. On one hand, it reflects the importance of English and French in Canada's history and identity, and in the everyday life of communities across the country. On the other, having an officially bilingual federal government is a guarantee to those living in Canada that the government will provide its services in English and in French, where demand warrants. This is why greater English–French bilingualism is of particular interest in Canada: it fosters mutual understanding and communication between English- and French-speaking communities and it ensures that the right of people living in Canada to receive federal services in either official language is respected.

With each census, the number of people who are able to have a conversation in English and French has continued to grow in Canada, totalling almost 6.6 million people in 2021. From the early 1960s to the turn of the century, the rate of English–French bilingualism in Canada rose sharply from 12.2% in 1961 to 17.7% in 2001. Since then, the proportion of the Canadian population who is bilingual in English and French has been relatively stable, with the bilingualism rate reaching 18.0% in 2021. Nonetheless, this is the highest proportion ever observed in a census.

The stability in the bilingualism rate observed recently is the result of two diverging trends: the increase in the rate of English–French bilingualism in Quebec, which offset the decrease observed outside the province.

Today, Statistics Canada is publishing an analysis of the evolution of English–French bilingualism in Canada, which also examines how changes in the demographic weight and bilingualism rate of populations with an English, French or other mother tongue have contributed to this evolution. Lastly, this report provides a glimpse into the link between schooling in the minority official language and English–French bilingualism.

English–French bilingualism in Canada: Recent trends after five decades of official bilingualism

Parlez-vous français? Do you speak English?

English–French bilingualism, or bilingualism in both official languages, refers to the ability to have a conversation in English and French, Canada’s two official languages. In the census question on knowledge of official languages, people report their ability to have a conversation in English, French, English and French, or neither.

The very first questions on the ability to speak English and French appeared in the 1901 Census of Population. At the time, 14.7% of Canada’s population knew English and French.

The rate of English–French bilingualism increases in Quebec and falls in Canada outside Quebec

In Canada and in each province and territory, except Alberta and Nunavut, there were a record number of bilingual English–French people in 2021.

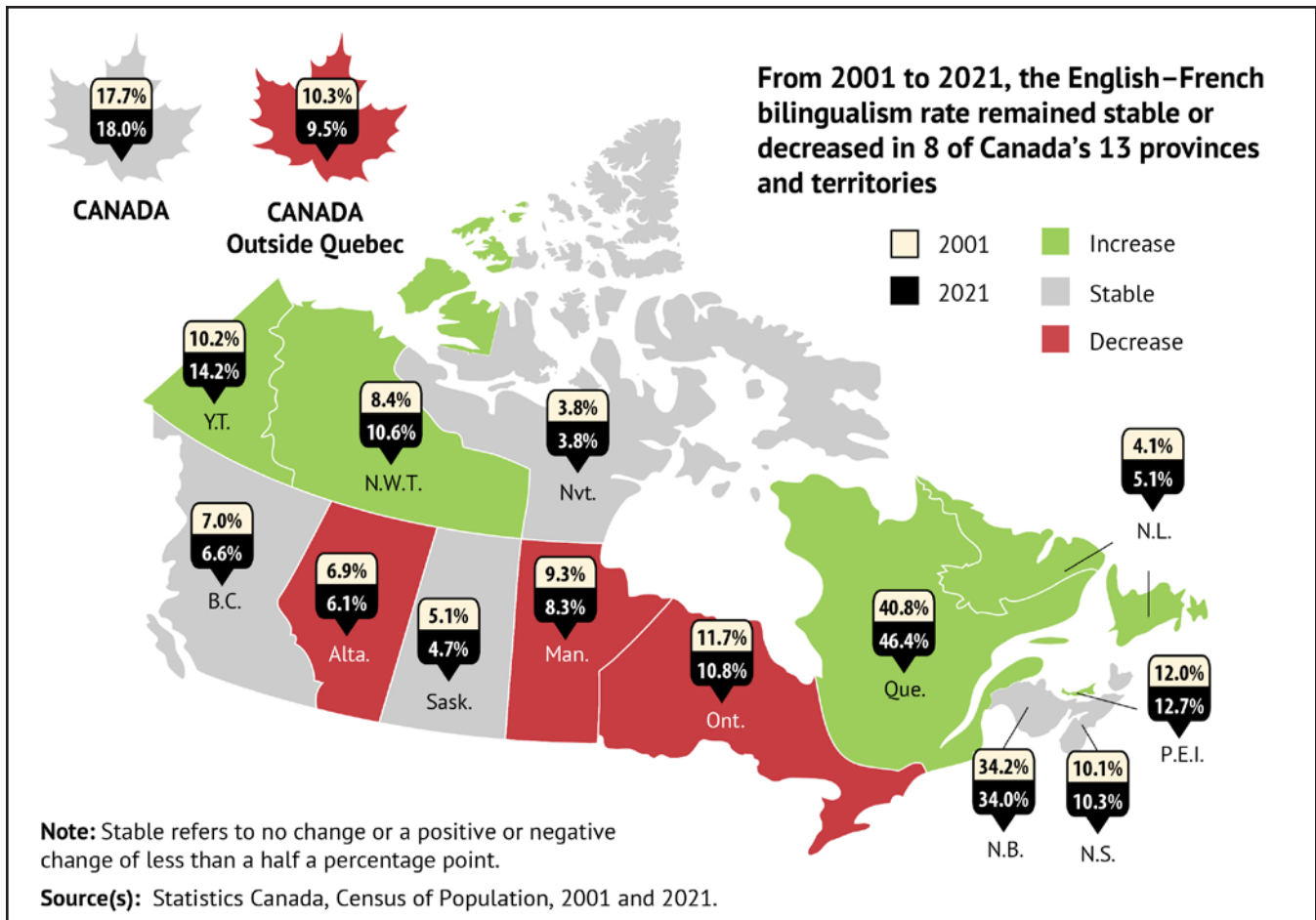
However, since the 2001 Census, the growth of the population who speaks English and French well enough to conduct a conversation has been lower or similar to the growth of the rest of the population in many provinces and territories, resulting in a declining or stable English–French bilingualism rate in these provinces and territories. For example, in New Brunswick, Canada’s only officially bilingual province, the English–French bilingualism rate has been stable,¹ standing at 34.2% in 2001 and 34.0% in 2021. In contrast, the bilingualism rate was higher in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories in 2021 than 20 years earlier.

In Canada outside Quebec as a whole, the rate of English–French bilingualism was on an upward trend from 1961 (6.9%) to the turn of the century (10.3% in 2001). Since then, with the exception of a slight rebound between 2011 and 2016, this rate fell from one cycle to the next, totalling 9.5% in 2021.

In Quebec, aside from a small decline from 2001 to 2006, the English–French bilingualism rate has been rising with each census since the early 1960s, increasing from 25.5% in 1961 to 40.8% in 2001, then reaching 46.4% in 2021. In other words, almost one in two people in Quebec could have a conversation in Canada’s two official languages in 2021.

1. In this report, “stable” means no change or a positive or negative change of less than half a percentage point.

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The increase in English–French bilingualism in Quebec and the decrease observed in Canada outside Quebec since the turn of the century can be observed in the geographic distribution of Canadians who can have a conversation in both official languages. In Canada, the proportion of English–French bilingual people living in Quebec increased from 55.6% in 2001 to 59.2% in 2021, bringing it closer to the level observed in 1961 (60.0%).

Moreover, the rate of bilingualism in both official languages was higher in regions where English- and French-language communities are in close contact, either in the same territory or in adjacent territories. These regions are, in fact, among those with the highest rates of English–French bilingualism in the country. For example, in 2021, Canada’s census metropolitan areas (CMA) with the highest bilingualism rates were Gatineau² (64.6%), Montréal (56.4%), Sherbrooke (46.0%) and Moncton (45.9%).

2. Quebec part of Ottawa–Gatineau.

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Table 1

In 2021, more than 1 in 5 people were bilingual (English and French) in 11 census metropolitan areas in Canada, 7 of which were located in Quebec

Census metropolitan area (CMA)	English–French bilingualism rate		
	2001	2021	Variation from 2001 to 2021
	percent		percentage points
Quebec (province)	40.8	46.4	5.6
Gatineau	64.0	64.6	0.6
Montréal	52.4	56.4	4.0
Sherbrooke	41.1	46.0	4.9
Québec (CMA)	32.6	41.5	8.9
Trois-Rivières	26.0	32.4	6.4
Drummondville	23.7	30.0	6.3
Saguenay	18.4	23.7	5.3
Non-CMAs	24.6	30.4	5.8
Canada outside Quebec	10.3	9.5	-0.8
Moncton	47.0	45.9	-1.1
Greater Sudbury	40.4	36.7	-3.7
Ottawa	36.2	36.4	0.2
Fredericton	20.6	22.5	1.9
Other CMAs	8.1	7.3	-0.8
Non-CMAs	10.4	9.5	-0.9

Note: In this table, the Ontario and Quebec parts of Ottawa–Gatineau are considered to be separate CMAs.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001 and 2021.

From 2001 to 2021, the English–French bilingualism rate increased in all large urban centres in Quebec. This rate rose 5.6 percentage points in the province during this period, but the increase was even larger in the CMAs of Québec (+8.9 percentage points), Trois-Rivières (+6.4 percentage points) and Drummondville (+6.3 percentage points), and in regions outside CMAs (+5.8 percentage points). In contrast, the growth of the bilingualism rate was smaller in the CMAs of Gatineau (+0.6 percentage points) and Montréal (+4.0 percentage points)—two CMAs that, in 2001, already had the highest bilingualism rates in the country.

The rate of English–French bilingualism declined 0.8 percentage points from 2001 to 2021 in Canada outside Quebec, as well as in Greater Sudbury (-3.7 percentage points) and Moncton (-1.1 percentage points), but remained stable (+0.2 percentage points) in Ottawa.³ In contrast, the bilingualism rate increased in Fredericton (+1.9 percentage points), New Brunswick’s capital, during the same period.

Lastly, the English–French bilingualism rate was even higher in certain municipalities⁴ in regions with large proportions of people in a minority language situation. For example, in 2021, more than four in five people were English–French bilingual in Fort-Coulonge (82.0%) in Quebec’s Outaouais region, and in Bouctouche (81.2%) in southeastern New Brunswick.

3. Ontario part of Ottawa–Gatineau.

4. Refers to census subdivisions.

In Quebec, French speakers learning English and immigration drive the English–French bilingualism rate upward

Across Canada, the prevalence of English–French bilingualism varies according to the first language learned in childhood, i.e., mother tongue.⁵

In Quebec, the rate of English–French bilingualism was 46.4% in 2021. For many decades, the bilingualism rate of Quebecers with an English mother tongue has been higher than the rate for the provincial population, totalling 67.1% in 2021. Because this English-speaking population is a minority in the province, it is more likely to come into contact with the other official language community and learn its language.

Similarly, the English–French bilingualism rate was higher than the average among Quebecers with another mother tongue, with just over half being able to have a conversation in Canada’s two official languages in 2021 (50.8%). Among people with another mother tongue—more than three-quarters (76.4%) of whom are immigrants or non-permanent residents—English and French are at least the second or third languages they learned.

Lastly, the rate of bilingualism in both official languages of Quebecers with a French mother tongue was lower than the average provincial rate in 2021. However, the bilingualism rate of this group grew the most from 2001 to 2021, increasing 5.6 percentage points from 36.6% to 42.2%. Growth in the bilingualism rate was slower in the populations with an English mother tongue (+1.0 percentage point) or another mother tongue (+0.4 percentage points).

From 2001 to 2021, the English–French bilingualism rate of the French-mother-tongue population in Quebec rose among both younger people and core-aged adults in the labour market. Over this period, this rate increased more than 12 percentage points for each five-year age group from 10 to 44 years. In addition, the bilingualism rate of the population with a French mother tongue rose in all the province’s regions⁶ and large urban centres.

The demographic weight of Quebec’s French-mother-tongue population decreased from 80.9% in 2001 to 74.8% in 2021. By comparison, the demographic weight of the population with an English mother tongue was more stable, edging down from 7.8% to 7.6%, while the weight of the population with another mother tongue advanced from 10.0% to 14.0%, driven by immigration. The combined effect of the changes in the demographic weights and the prevalence of bilingualism based on mother tongue accounts for the increase in the English–French bilingualism rate in Quebec from 2001 to 2021.

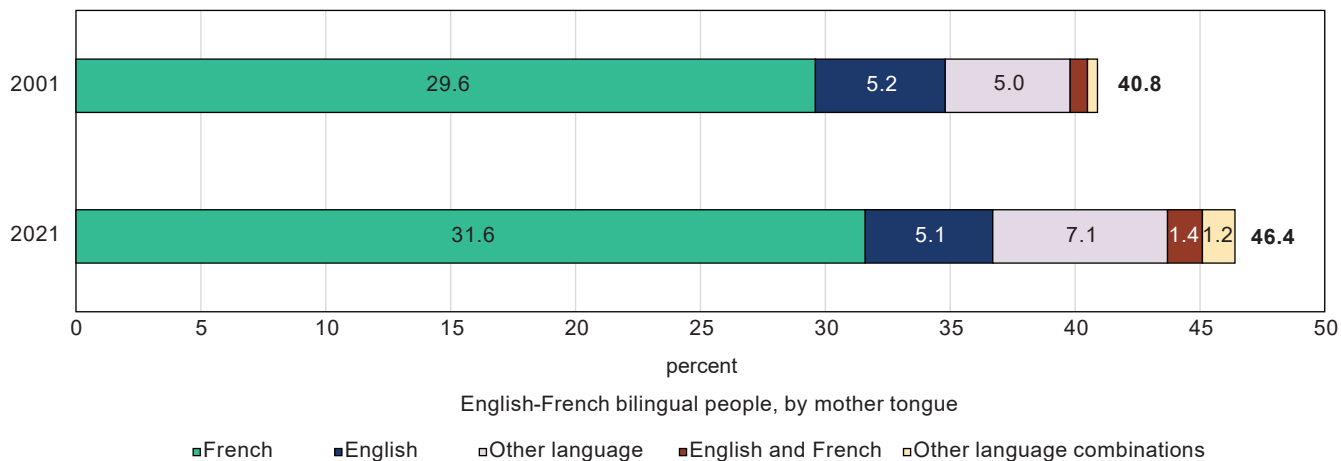
5. In this report, populations with an “English” or “French” mother tongue comprise individuals who reported a single mother tongue (single responses). The population with “another” mother tongue comprises individuals who reported one or multiple non-official mother tongues. Other individuals with more than one mother tongue (multiple responses), i.e., a combination of English and French or other language combinations, are examined separately.

6. Refers to economic regions (also called administrative regions in Quebec).

English–French bilingualism in Canada: Recent trends after five decades of official bilingualism

Chart 1

In Quebec, the increase in the rate of bilingualism in both official languages from 2001 to 2021 was driven by the growing proportion of bilingual people with French or another language as their mother tongue



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001 and 2021.

The proportion of Quebecers who could conduct a conversation in Canada’s two official languages increased 5.6 percentage points from 2001 to 2021. A large share of this gain is attributable to the growth in the proportion of the population who is bilingual in English and French and has a French mother tongue (+2.0 percentage points) or another mother tongue (+2.1 percentage points). On one hand, the increase in the bilingualism rate of the French-mother-tongue population more than offset the decrease in its demographic weight. On the other, the bilingualism rate of the population with another mother tongue was stable from 2001 to 2021, but its demographic weight increased thanks to immigration.

The increase in the English–French bilingualism rate in Quebec from 2001 to 2021 was also driven by the growth of the bilingual population with more than one mother tongue, i.e., individuals who learned English and French (+0.7 percentage points) or another language combination (+0.8 percentage points) at the same time in childhood. For more information on individuals with more than one mother tongue, see the box entitled “Bilingual from childhood.”

Fewer French speakers and more Asian-born speakers of another language contribute to the decline in the rate of bilingualism in both official languages in Canada outside Quebec

Like in Quebec, a large proportion of the population in Canada outside Quebec whose first language is the minority official language—French, in this case—could carry on a conversation in both official languages in 2021 (85.3%). By comparison, the English–French bilingualism rates of individuals with an English or another mother tongue were lower; around 1 in 14 English speakers (7.1%) and fewer than 1 in 20 speakers of another language (4.7%) were proficient enough in both official languages to conduct a conversation.

In Canada outside Quebec, the English–French bilingualism rate of the population with another mother tongue fell 1 percentage point from 5.7% in 2001 to 4.7% in 2021. In comparison, this rate was more stable among French speakers (+0.2 percentage points) and English speakers (no change).

The English–French bilingualism rate of the population with an English mother tongue remained stable over this period due to diverging trends between certain age groups. One of these trends is the rising bilingualism rate of young English speakers aged 5 to 14, which increased from 8.8% in 2001 to 11.2% in 2021. One factor that drove this rate upward was the growing number of young people in French immersion programs. In contrast, the bilingualism rate of English speakers aged 20 to 29 decreased from 12.0% in 2001 to 9.0% in 2021.

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The 1 percentage-point decrease in the bilingualism rate of the other-mother-tongue population is due in part to a change in the composition of this population by place of birth. From 2001 to 2021, the proportion of people with another mother tongue who were born in an Asian country rose sharply on account of immigration (from 35.6% to 55.2%), while the proportion of this population born in Europe dropped from 27.9% to 15.8%. In 2021, the English–French bilingualism rate was lower among individuals with another mother tongue born in Asia (2.0%) than among their counterparts born in Europe (6.0%), in the Americas (excluding Canada) (8.1%) or in Africa (13.8%). The growing proportion of Asian-born non-official language speakers and the decline in the proportion of non-official language speakers born in Europe therefore contributed to the drop in the bilingualism rate of non-official language speakers in Canada outside Quebec.

Multilingual despite a lower rate of bilingualism in both official languages

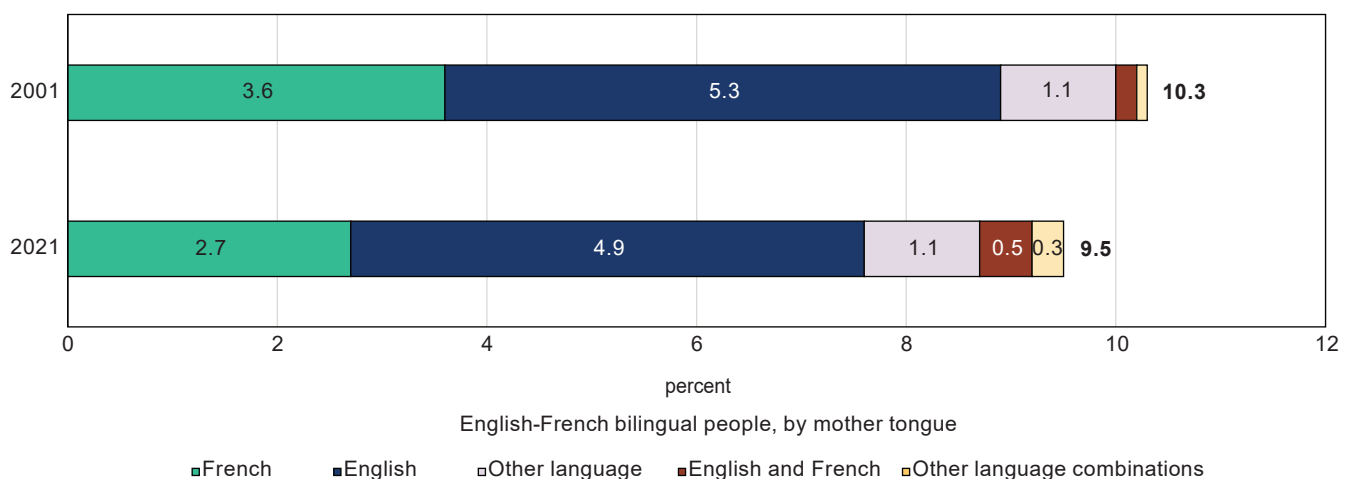
In Canada outside Quebec in 2021, more than one in eight people were Asian-born and had another mother tongue. Of these people, 2.0% could have a conversation in English and French. Although their rate of bilingualism in both official languages is lower, these individuals were multilingual. In fact, one-quarter (25.0%) could have a conversation in at least three languages, be it an official or another language. Most often, these individuals knew English and at least two other non-official languages. The ability to have a conversation in French was rarer.

In addition, of Asian-born individuals with another mother tongue who were living in Canada outside Quebec in 2021, the English–French bilingualism rate was higher among those who had immigrated during their childhood (5.2%), since they were able to start or continue their schooling in Canada. The bilingualism rate was also higher among people born in certain Asian countries, such as Lebanon (23.6%) and Iran (4.7%), while it was lower among people born in the Philippines (0.6%) and India (0.9%).

From 2001 to 2021, the demographic weight of the population with a French mother tongue in Canada outside Quebec decreased (from 4.2% to 3.2%), as did the weight of the English-mother-tongue population (from 74.6% to 69.0%). In contrast, the demographic weight of individuals with another mother tongue rose from 20.0% to 24.0%. The combined effect of the change in the demographic weights of these populations and their knowledge of official languages accounts for the decrease in the English–French bilingualism rate in Canada outside Quebec over this period.

Chart 2

Outside Quebec, a decrease in the proportion of bilingual people with a French mother tongue contributed to the drop in the rate of bilingualism in both official languages from 2001 to 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001 and 2021.

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In both 2001 and 2021, English was the mother tongue of more than half of bilingual English–French people in Canada outside Quebec.

In 2021, 9.5% of people in Canada outside Quebec could have a conversation in English and French, a decrease of 0.8 percentage points from 2001. Much of this decrease stems from the decline in the proportion of the bilingual population whose mother tongue is French (-0.9 percentage points). The proportion of bilingual people with an English mother tongue also fell during this period (-0.4 percentage points). However, this downturn was offset by the growth of the bilingual population whose first languages learned in childhood were English and French (+0.3 percentage points) and of the bilingual population with another combination of mother tongues (+0.2 percentage points).

Lastly, although people whose mother tongue is a non-official language make up a growing proportion of the Canadian population outside Quebec, the decline in their rate of bilingualism in both official languages held the proportion of bilingual people with another mother tongue in Canada outside Quebec stable at 1.1% in 2001 and 2021.

Bilingual from childhood

Since the turn of the century, a growing proportion of Canadians have reported having learned two or more languages at the same time in childhood, be it a combination of English, French or another language. In 2001, this proportion was 1.3% and rose to 3.8%⁷ in 2021. More in-depth analysis is required to better understand this increase. Among the many factors that may have contributed to this gain is the increasing number of children who grow up in families where more than one language is spoken at home, such as in exogamous⁸ or immigrant families.

The English–French bilingualism rate of people with more than one mother tongue attests to the fact that they first learned more than one language in childhood. For example, in Quebec in 2021, the bilingualism rate of those with English and French as their mother tongues was 93.3%, while the rate for those with another mother tongue combination stood at 58.6%. The corresponding proportions in Canada outside Quebec were 83.3% and 9.3%, respectively.

However, not everyone whose mother tongues are English and French were able to have a conversation in both official languages at the time of the census. Sometimes, people who do not fluently speak one of the first languages they learned feel they can no longer have a conversation in that language, even though they can still understand it. This is especially true as people get older. For example, in Quebec, the rate of bilingualism in both official languages of people with English and French as their mother tongues was 96.7% among speakers aged 10 to 29, compared with 82.1% among those aged 75 and older.

The English–French bilingualism rate peaks among individuals who attended primary or secondary school in the minority official language

The ability to have a conversation in a second language varies by a person's age and educational pathway.⁹ For example, in 2021, the English–French bilingualism rate was higher among Quebec residents who attended an English school and residents of Canada outside Quebec who attended a French school or a French immersion program for all or part of their primary or secondary education than among individuals who did not attend these schools or programs.

7. Excludes the new category "multiple non-official languages," which was introduced in the 2021 Census.

8. A linguistically exogamous family is a two-parent family where the parents do not have the same mother tongue.

9. In Canada, eligibility for schools that offer programs in the minority official language is detailed in section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

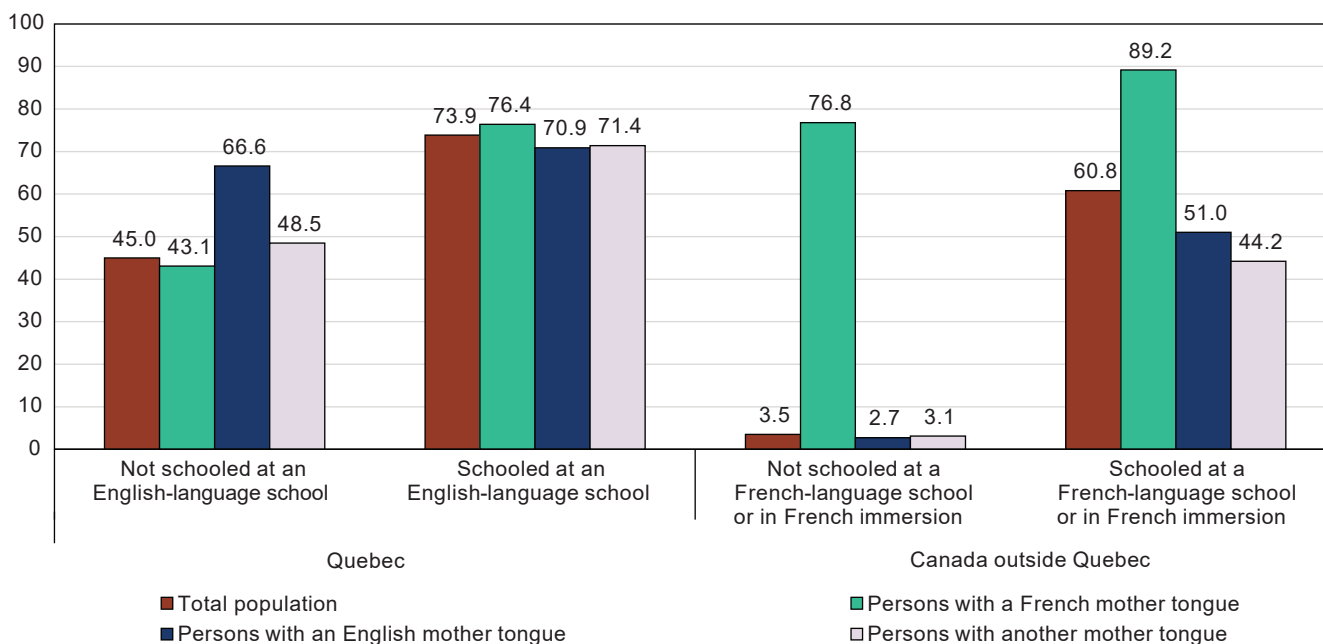
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In Quebec, close to three-quarters of people who attended an English-language school¹⁰ (73.9%) reported being able to have a conversation in Canada’s two official languages in 2021, compared with 45.0% of people who did not attend an English-language school, a gap of 28.9 percentage points. The difference in the bilingualism rate of people schooled in English and those who were not was greater among individuals with a French mother tongue (33.3 percentage points) or another mother tongue (22.9 percentage points), and smaller among people with an English mother tongue (4.3 percentage points).

Chart 3

In Quebec and Canada outside Quebec, the rate of English–French bilingualism is higher among people who were schooled in the minority official language

English–French bilingualism rate



Note: Population born before 2016.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Similarly, in Canada outside Quebec, the English–French bilingualism rate in 2021 was higher among individuals schooled in French¹¹ (60.8%) than among those who were not (3.5%). The difference was especially large among those with an English mother tongue (48.3 percentage points) or another mother tongue (41.1 percentage points), while it was smaller among those with a French mother tongue (12.4 percentage points).

Lastly, there are a number of reasons why a person schooled in the minority official language may report not being able to conduct a conversation in both official languages. For example, some people may have only done part of their schooling (e.g., one year) in the minority official language. Or it may have been years since they finished primary or secondary school, and during those years, they have not spoken the minority official language enough to continue being able to have a conversation. Likewise, some people may, over time, report no longer being able to have a conversation in the first language they learned. Further studies are needed to get a better understanding of the different life pathways associated with the loss or maintenance over time of the ability to have a conversation in a language.

10. This includes Quebec residents born before 2016 who attended an English-language school in Canada for at least one year.

11. This includes residents of Canada outside Quebec born before 2016 who attended a French-language school or a French immersion program in Canada for at least one year.

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Looking ahead

This article gives an overview of recent trends associated with the evolution of the English–French bilingualism rate in Quebec, in Canada outside Quebec and in Canada. The results of the 2021 Census and previous censuses provide insight into how the change in the demographic weight of groups of speakers as well as their bilingualism rate led to a record proportion of Canadians who were able to have a conversation in both official languages in 2021.

For the first time, the 2021 Census results shed light on the importance of the language of schooling at the primary and secondary levels to learn the official languages. Future studies on topics such as participation in French immersion programs in Canada outside Quebec will give a clearer picture of this situation.

Additional information

The key 2021 Census results on knowledge of English and French in Canada were published on August 17, 2022, in the *Daily* article "[While English and French are still the main languages spoken in Canada, the country's linguistic diversity continues to grow](#)" and in the infographic "[More than one language in the bag: The rate of English–French bilingualism is increasing in Quebec and decreasing outside Quebec.](#)"

Additional information on knowledge of official languages can be found in [data tables](#) and the [Census Profile](#).

[Reference products](#) are designed to help users make the most of 2021 Census data. These include the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2021](#), the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021](#) and the [2021 Census of Population questionnaires](#). The [Languages Reference Guide](#) is also available.

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