

The French Factor: How Language Shapes Employment in Québec

PROVINCIAL EMPLOYMENT ROUNDTABLE



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*Secrétariat aux relations
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While recent research has mythbusted the idea that English-speaking Quebecers enjoy a better socioeconomic position than French speakers in the province, little attention has been paid to the specific role of language proficiency. This report seeks to address that gap, establishing that within Québec's two linguistic communities, bilingualism – and its inverse, unilingualism – are correlated with employment and economic outcomes. More specifically, while English speakers as a whole fare worse in the labour market, unilingual English speakers experience the worst disparities.

Our key findings are:

- Unilingual English speakers make up 5.3% of the province's total population, and 4.8 % of its labour force;
- Unilingual English speakers tend to work in industries and occupations where French language proficiency may be a lesser requirement: their top three industries are manufacturing (employing 11.9%), professional, scientific, and technical services (11.4%), and retail trade (9.6%);
- Unilingual English speakers have an unemployment rate of 13.5%, approximately double that of both unilingual French speakers (7.3%) and bilingual French speakers (6.6%);
- Unilingual English speakers have a poverty rate of 15.7%, approximately triple that of both unilingual French speakers (6.2%) and bilingual French speakers (5.3%);
- Unilingual English speakers have a median employment income of \$24,000, earning \$8,800 less than unilingual French speakers and \$17,600 less than bilingual French speakers.

The data paints a troubling picture for unilingual English speakers. While the surrounding literature shows they understand the socioeconomic consequences of limited French proficiency in Quebec and are motivated to learn, many face barriers that hinder their progress. These range from limited access and long wait times to inadequate or non-tailored training, compounded by linguisticism and linguistic anxiety. We therefore conclude that continued unilingualism among English speakers stems not from the English-speaking community itself, but from systemic policy and regulatory failures in education, language, immigration, and employment that have not delivered the conditions needed for successful French acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

The myth that English-speaking Quebecers are an elite, economically privileged group is the outgrowth of a bygone era. While political power and wealth were concentrated among a minority population of English speakers prior to the 1970s, the adoption of the Charter of the French Language inverted disparities between Québec’s linguistic communities. English-speaking Quebecers now fare worse than French speakers across most socioeconomic indicators, and the gaps are widening.¹

Preliminary evidence suggests that there are also socioeconomic disparities within Québec’s linguistic communities, according to their linguistic proficiencies. Among adults,² almost two-thirds (64.8%) of English-speaking Quebecers are English-French bilingual, compared to just under half of French speakers (48.9%). The remaining one-third (35.2%) of English-speaking Quebecers are “unilingual,” compared to the 51.1% of the province’s French speakers. Of these groups, unilingual English speakers fare the worst in Québec’s labour market.³

This report aims to deepen our understanding of the employment situation of unilingual English-speaking Quebecers. We utilize data from the 2021 Census of Canada to present a portrait of this community, as well as correlations between linguistic proficiency and socioeconomic outcomes in Québec. We supplement these findings with literature on French language learning in Québec in order to propose evidence-based policy recommendations and specific interventions to facilitate unilingual English speakers’ integration into the labour market.

¹ Provincial Employment Roundtable, “CENSUS 2021 Update: A brief review of the latest data on employment among Québec’s English speakers,” 2024, <https://pertquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Building-healthy-systems-Mobilizing-the-potential-of-English-speakers-to-enhance-Quebecs-healthcare-sector-2.pdf>.

² “Adult” here refers to individuals aged 15+.

³ Adapted from Statistics Canada. (2021). 2021 Census - 25% Sample Data, [custom table]. All statistics in this report are based on calculations derived from Statistics Canada data tables, unless otherwise indicated.



CONTEXT

The 1977 adoption of the Charter of the French language made French the sole official language of Québec. Recent modernization of the charter through Law 14 (formerly Bill 96) went further, establishing French as the province's sole language of work. Already, the changes made through Law 14 – touching on hiring practices, workplace communications, and reporting policies – are beginning to impact employment. In a recent survey of 500 Québec employers, one-fifth indicated that they are concerned about hiring English speakers.⁴

This development stands to accelerate trends that see Québec's English-speaking communities, which number 1.25 million individuals, experience heightened socioeconomic precarity across a number of indicators.⁵ In 2021, prior to the adoption of Law 14,

- English speakers made up 14.9% of Québec's total population, but 22.7% of the unemployed population;
- English speakers experienced a higher unemployment rate than French speakers by four percentage points (10.9% compared to 6.9%);
- English speakers earned a lower median employment income by \$5,200 (\$32,000 compared to \$37,200); and
- Almost double the proportion of English speakers as opposed to French speakers live below the low-income cut-off (LICO) (9.3% compared to 4.8%).

These outcomes are true of the English-speaking community as a whole, and hold across the province's regions. In fact, these disparities are often exacerbated in rural and remote areas such as Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Côte-Nord, and Nord-du-Québec.⁶ They are also heightened among diverse groups within the English-speaking community, including youth, immigrants, racialized people, and First Nations and Inuit.⁷

This data serves to establish *that* English speakers occupy a more precarious economic position as compared to French speakers in the province. Previous PERT research has

⁴ Advisory Committee for English-speaking Quebecers, "Employer Perceptions of English-speaking Employees," January 21, 2025,

https://ccqea.ca/wp-content/uploads/16456-002_CCQEA_Rapport_Final_EN_QA.pdf.

⁵ Provincial Employment Roundtable, "CENSUS 2021 Update."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



also endeavoured to determine *why*. A 2022 study conducted with English-speaking Quebecers and English language organizations found that:⁸

Among individual respondents:

- 67% indicated that they'd experienced lack of French language proficiency as a barrier to employment in the last three years;
- 31% indicated that linguistic discrimination and/or employer bias based on language had been a barrier to employment in the past three years;
- 53% identified intensive French language training as a desirable intervention.

Among organizational respondents:

- 75% indicated that lack of French language proficiency was a barrier to employment for English speakers;
- 84% indicated that workplace-integrated French language training would most benefit English speakers.

Since the publication of this study, the Québec government created Francisation Québec and allotted \$214 million over five years to enhance the usage of French across the province's workplaces, schools, and broader society. The cornerstone of this was a centralized, online platform for adult French language learning services, launched in 2023.

While the launch of Francisation Québec services was a pivotal advancement towards widespread availability of French language learning in Québec, there remains work to be done. Internal reports indicate that there have been considerable challenges in the rollout, including reports of bottlenecks and long wait times for courses, which have raised concerns about the program's accessibility and efficacy.⁹ Other accessibility concerns include regional availability, lack of targeted marketing services to language-learning groups, availability of the platform in French only, and, most recently, funding cuts for

⁸ Provincial Employment Roundtable, "2021 Employment Survey of English-speaking Quebecers and Organizations," 2022, https://pertquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PERT_MC_Design_SRQEA_CORE_EINR_D5R02_20220823_EN_Web.pdf.

⁹ Commissaire à la langue française, "Évaluation du déploiement de Francisation Québec," May 29, 2024, https://www.commissairelanguefrancaise.quebec/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA_chap4_evaluation-FQ.pdf.



part-time learners¹⁰ as well as widespread cancellation of classes owing to budget shortfalls.¹¹

These are issues that stand to affect many within the English-speaking community who want to benefit from French language training. Compounding this, further PERT research has established that certain groups within the English-speaking community are in need of specific training and interventions. While Francisation Québec offers programming targeted to immigrants and Canadian-born English speakers (including Québec-born English speakers), groups ranging from international students¹² to individuals living in poverty,¹³ to immigrants and non-permanent residents entering Canada with experiences of trauma,¹⁴ need tailored supports that consider their specific circumstances.

Evidently, both the audience and the delivery of French language training in Quebec demand careful consideration. This report therefore aims to understand the composition and situation of one of the groups most likely to benefit from French language training and support – unilingual English-speaking Quebecers – to gain insight into the specific interventions they might need.

¹⁰ Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, "Updates to financial assistance offered under the Programme québécois d'apprentissage du français," Government of Québec, September 13, 2024, <https://www.quebec.ca/en/news/actualites/detail/updates-financial-assistance-programme-quebécois-apprentissage-français-58040>.

¹¹ Leora Schertzer, "Quebec teachers fear more francization classes will end next year," *The Montreal Gazette*, October 29, 2024 <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-teachers-fear-francization-classes-will-end-next-year>.

¹² Provincial Employment Roundtable, "User journeys of language learners navigating Québec's French language training ecosystem," 2024, <https://pertquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/User-journeys-of-language-learners-navigating-Quebecs-French-language-training-ecosystem-1.pdf>.

¹³ Provincial Employment Roundtable, "Mapping Employment Supports for Québec's Racialized and Immigrant English-speaking Communities," 2023, <https://pertquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Mapping-Employment-Supports-for-Quebecs-Racialized-and-Immigrant-English-speaking-Communities.pdf>

¹⁴ Garine Papazian-Zohrabian et al., "Rapport de recherche: Projet de recherche menant au développement d'un programme-cadre gouvernemental de francisation pour les personnes ayant des compétences peu développées en littératie et en numératie," Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, 2021, <https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/min/immigration/publications-adm/acces-information/demandes-acces/2022/23094.pdf>.



METHODOLOGY

This report presents demographic, labour force, and economic data from the 2021 Census of Canada. To accomplish this, we ordered custom data tables from Statistics Canada that allow for linguistic comparisons across different socioeconomic indicators, which researchers then extracted and analyzed.

The report utilizes 25% sample data, drawn from the approximately 25% of Canadian private households that received a long-form census questionnaire. Owing to limits on the data available, all data pertains to individuals who are aged 15 and over.

LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

Statistics Canada uses a variety of methods to measure and classify linguistic identity in the Census of Canada. Classifications include mother tongue, language spoken most often at home, and knowledge of official and unofficial languages. In this report, we use Statistics Canada's First Official Language Spoken (FOLS) classification to define English and French speakers in Québec. FOLS is a derived concept that considers a person's knowledge of Canada's two official languages, their mother tongue, and the language they speak most often at home in order to designate their first official language as English, French, both or neither. We additionally divide individuals who speak both official languages evenly among the English FOLS and French FOLS populations.

This is the most inclusive classification of English and French speakers because it accounts for individuals who speak multiple languages, those who speak both official languages but are more comfortable in English, and finally those who are not highly proficient in either official language but consider themselves more proximate to English or French. It offers a realistic count of individuals who may seek out or benefit from English language services, or other language-specific services such as French language training.

LINGUISTIC PROFICIENCY

In this report, we utilize Statistics Canada's classification of knowledge of official languages to measure linguistic proficiency, i.e. bilingualism versus unilingualism. This classification refers to whether an individual can conduct a conversation in English only,

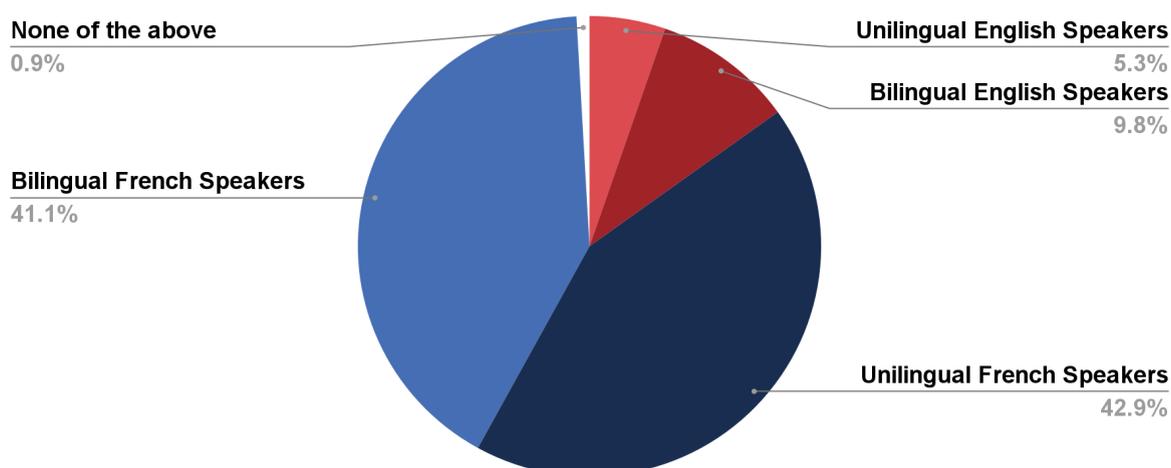
French only, in both official languages, or in neither. It should be noted, however, that this metric relies on self-reported data, and primarily measures conversational ability. For this reason, it captures a broad spectrum of linguistic proficiency, ranging from intermediate to full fluency. Furthermore, this metric refers solely to bilingualism in terms of English and French. Thus, while we discuss bilingual English and French speakers as well as unilingual English and French speakers in this report, these same individuals may be proficient in a third or multiple languages not captured through this definition.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT

In Québec, English speakers make up 14.9% of the province's population, while French speakers account for 84.1% of the population. When each linguistic community is broken down according to linguistic proficiency, we observe that 5.3% of the province's total population - or 369,420 individuals - are unilingual English speakers.

[GRAPHIC - share of total QC population according to unilingual ES, bilingual ES, unilingual FS and bilingual FS]



Who are the unilingual English speakers?

About one-third (35.2%) of Québec's English speakers are unilingual. Of these individuals:

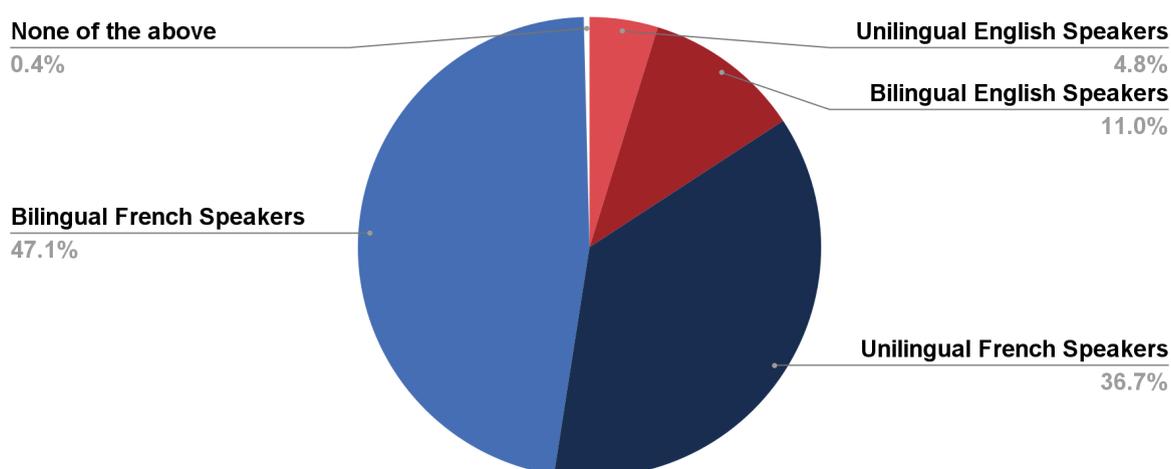
- Roughly half identify as men (51.1%) and half identify as women (48.9%)
- 11.3% are youth aged 15-24, while 23.7% are aged 65 or older
- Roughly half identify as visible minorities (51.2%)
- A small proportion (6.1%) are Indigenous
- Approximately half are immigrants (49.8%) and 14.1% are non-permanent residents

- Over half (60.7%) live in Montréal, although there are at least 200 unilingual English speakers in every region, and more than 1000 in 12 out of the 17 regions in the province
- Over half (54.1%) have attained a post-secondary degree, and 79.4% have attained at least a secondary school degree

EMPLOYMENT PORTRAIT

Québec's labour force counts 4,435,465 individuals, 4.8% of whom (211,590 individuals) are unilingual English speakers.

[GRAPHIC - share of QC labour force according to unilingual ES, bilingual ES, unilingual FS and bilingual FS]



What kinds of work are unilingual English speakers engaged in?

Unilingual English speakers tend to work in industries and occupations¹⁵ where French language proficiency may be a lesser requirement, either because the working language is English (as in some technology- or finance-oriented companies) or because the sector does not center on linguistic competencies and spoken communication generally (e.g. manufacturing).

¹⁵ Occupation data refers to specific professions in which individuals are employed, which often correspond to a specific level of education (e.g. doctor, pharmacist, licenced practical nurse.) Industry data, meanwhile, refers to individuals working within a given field - for example, individuals such as doctors as well as administrative assistants at hospitals would both be considered as working in the healthcare industry.

- The main industry in which unilingual English speakers work is manufacturing (11.9%), followed by professional, scientific, and technical services (11.4%) and then retail trade (9.6%).
- One quarter (25.7%) of unilingual English speakers are employed in sales and service occupations. Following this, 15.8% are employed in trades, transport and equipment operated and related occupations, and 14.3% in Business, finance and administration occupations.
- Of the unilingual English speakers who worked during the reference year (2020), approximately two-thirds (63.4%) held permanent positions, while 20.5% held temporary positions. The remaining 16.1% were self-employed.

Top Industries for Unilingual English Speakers	
Manufacturing	11.9%
Professional, scientific and technical services	11.4%
Retail trade	9.6%
Health care and social assistance	8.8%
Accommodation and food services	8.7%
Transportation and warehousing	8.5%
Educational services	7.8%
Administrative and support, waste management and remediation services	5.4%
Other services (except public administration)	5.0%
Wholesale trade	4.9%

Top Professions for Unilingual English Speakers	
Sales and service occupations	25.7%
Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations	15.8%
Business, finance and administration occupations	14.3%
Natural and applied sciences and related occupations	12.3%
Occupations in education, law and social, community and government services	10.7%
Occupations in manufacturing and utilities	8.5%
Health occupations	5.3%
Occupations in art, culture, recreation and sport	4.4%

Natural resources, agriculture and related production occupations	1.7%
Legislative and senior management occupations	1.1%

How do unilingual English speakers compare to other linguistic proficiency groups in Québec?

Unilingual English speakers tend to fare worse when compared to other linguistic proficiency groups in Québec, according to both labour force and economic indicators. Bilingual French speakers fare the best across all labour force and economic indicators.

Unemployment Rate:

- Unilingual English speakers' unemployment rate is more than double that of bilingual French speakers (13.5% compared to 6.6%).

	Unilingual ES	Bilingual ES	Unilingual FS	Bilingual FS
Québec	13.5%	9.7%	7.3%	6.6%

Employment Rate:

- Unilingual English speakers have the lowest employment rate, followed by unilingual French speakers. Bilingual English and French speakers have significantly higher rates of employment.

	Unilingual ES	Bilingual ES	Unilingual FS	Bilingual FS
Québec	49.5%	64.7%	50.9%	68.7%

Labour Force Participation Rate:

- Unilingual French speakers have the lowest labour force participation rate, followed by unilingual English speakers.

	Unilingual ES	Bilingual ES	Unilingual FS	Bilingual FS
Québec	57.3%	71.7%	54.9%	73.6%

Median employment income:

- Unilingual English speakers have the lowest median employment income, earning \$8,800 less than unilingual French speakers, who have the second-lowest income. There is a \$17,600 income gap between unilingual English speakers and bilingual French speakers.

	Unilingual ES	Bilingual ES	Unilingual FS	Bilingual FS
Québec	\$24,000	\$38,000	\$32,800	\$41,600

Poverty rate:

- Unilingual English speakers have a poverty rate (15.7%) almost triple that of bilingual French speakers (5.3%).

	Unilingual ES	Bilingual ES	Unilingual FS	Bilingual FS
Québec	15.7%	6.9%	6.2%	5.3%

Low-Income Cut-off (After-tax):

- More than one-fifth (21.7%) of all unilingual English speakers live under the low-income cut-off (LICO). There is a 7-percentage-point gap between unilingual English speakers and unilingual French speakers, who experience the second-highest representation under the LICO.

	Unilingual ES	Bilingual ES	Unilingual FS	Bilingual FS
Québec	21.7%	10.9%	14.7%	8.6%

DISCUSSION

The quantitative data reveals that English speakers with low French language proficiency experience worse socioeconomic outcomes compared to bilingual English speakers as well as unilingual and bilingual French speakers. In particular, unilingual English speakers experience dramatically higher unemployment and poverty rates and earn significantly lower median employment incomes. Labour force participation rate data, meanwhile, shows that unilingual English speakers have a slightly higher labour force participation as compared to unilingual French speakers, but a lower employment rate. As a result, there is a larger gap between unilingual English speakers' employment and labour force participation rates, suggesting that they are more heavily engaged in the labour force, but less successful in securing employment.

Our findings therefore indicate that unilingual English speakers face significant barriers to labour force integration and advancement in Québec. Furthermore, these barriers are often experienced by bilingual English speakers as well, insofar as they have worse socioeconomic outcomes than unilingual French speakers across several key variables (e.g. unemployment rate, poverty rate). Bilingual French speakers fare the best in each variable measured, often by several percentage points. This suggests that in Québec, bilingualism is correlated with stronger socioeconomic outcomes, as is speaking French as one's first official language, while unilingualism and speaking English as one's first official language are correlated with worse socioeconomic outcomes.

ACCESS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE SUPPORT SERVICES

Given that English speakers – and especially unilingual English speakers – are overrepresented in both unemployed and impoverished populations in Québec, we must consider the heightened need for English language support services, including both employment-specific programming as well as essential services such as health care or housing.

Current linguistic policy in Québec endeavours to increase the use of French in all areas of life, including service provision, but this is sometimes at odds with the immediate needs of service users and potential service users. Many in this group do not speak French and are therefore unable to access French-only services. As a result, they may not be able to access care or improve their employability in order to enter the workforce and earn an income. These are essential steps to ensure individuals can lead stable and dignified lives,



and are worth providing for this reason alone. At the same time, however, these are also essential precursors to an individual's capacity to participate in French language training or Francization projects.¹⁶ French language learners must have basic needs such as health care, housing, and income met in order to be mentally and physically able to learn, and their status as learners de facto indicates that these upstream necessities must be available in languages other than French.

FRENCH LANGUAGE RESOURCES

The quantitative findings are consistent with the research discussed in the context section, which establishes that English speakers identify lack of French-language proficiency as the leading barrier to employment in Québec. Taken together, these findings reinforce the need for increased, accessible French language learning specifically targeted to individuals with varying levels of French language proficiency.

Current programming, however, is inadequate to meet the demand: a 2024 report published by the Commissaire à la langue française indicated that approximately 50% of individuals seeking French courses through Francisation Québec were still awaiting placement at time of publication.¹⁷ Furthermore, research by PERT highlights the need for diversification of French language training according to proficiency level, as well as other specifics such as profession. There is a need for greater availability of French language training to help address language-related barriers to labour market entry and improve employment outcomes among those not fully proficient in French, including unilingual English speakers.

ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATIONS REGARDING FRENCH LANGUAGE LEARNING

A 2025 PERT report on language learning needs in the regions of Quebec found that English speakers are strongly motivated to learn French, citing a diversity of reasons, e.g. that it felt important to them, aligned with their values, furthered their sense of social

¹⁶ Provincial Employment Roundtable, "Mapping Employment Supports.," Provincial Employment Roundtable, "Understanding Learning Timelines for Adults in Second Language Training," 2024, <https://pertquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Understanding-Learning-Timelines-for-Adults-in-Second-Language-Training.pdf>.

¹⁷ Commissaire à la langue française, "Évaluation du déploiement de Francisation Québec,"



belonging, or would support their career development.¹⁸ This echoes findings from PERT's 2022 employment study, which established that the majority of English-speaking respondents were interested in French-language training, especially in a workplace context. Similarly, a report by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages establishes that English speakers desire to be liked and accepted by Francophones in Québec.¹⁹

There are, it is worth noting, English speakers who describe a more complicated relationship with French and French language learning. Some express frustration towards the current language policy in the province, insofar as it adopts a "draconian" or otherwise negative means to promote the French language.²⁰ Similarly, in PERT's 2025 study, some respondents described negative motivations to learn French, such as feelings of anxiety or shame, or external pressure.²¹

Similarly, some English speakers describe strong initial motivations to learn or otherwise improve their French-language proficiency that are dampened by the inaccessibility of French language training or negative reactions to their French language proficiency in public settings, which left them feeling embarrassed or anxious.²² Second-language acquisition research demonstrates that a safe and positive learning environment is linked to higher motivation as well as better learning outcomes.²³

Furthermore, current investments in French-language learning in Québec do not target English-speaking Quebecers.²⁴ This perpetuates the lack of material resources available to English-speaking Quebecers who want to improve their French and additionally reinforces

¹⁸ Provincial Employment Roundtable, "Need to Know, Want to Know: Regional Québec English Speakers' French Language Learning Experiences," (2026).

¹⁹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, "Building Bridges: Perceptions and realities about the English-speaking communities of Quebec and their relationship with French in Quebec and bilingualism in Canada," Government of Canada, June 2024, <https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/sites/default/files/2024-06/building-bridges-perceptions-realities-2024.pdf>

²⁰ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, "Building Bridges."

²¹ Provincial Employment Roundtable, "Need to Know, Want to Know: Regional Québec English Speakers' French Language Learning Experiences."

²² Provincial Employment Roundtable, "User journeys,"

²³ See Jason Moser et. al., "Mind your errors: Evidence for a neural mechanism linking growth mind-set to adaptive posterror adjustment," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 12 (Fall 2011): 1484, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611419520>;

Laurence G. Weinzimmer and Candace A. Esken, "Learning from Mistakes: How Mistake Tolerance Positively Affects Organizational Learning and Performance," *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 53, no. 2 (2017): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886316688658>.

²⁴ Government of Québec, "Au Québec, l'avenir s'écrit en français: Plan pour la langue française," 2024, <https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/min/langue-francaise/fr/plans-action/francaise/plan-langue-francaise.pdf>

the messaging that linguistic minorities are not desirable teammates for the project of promoting and protecting French in Québec.

CONCLUSION

The data indicates that the majority of English-speaking Quebecers are bilingual, and furthermore that the majority of English-speaking Quebecers are motivated to continue to improve their French and participate in Québec society. While some English speakers do express frustration at what they characterize as the negative pressure to speak French, this is counterbalanced by the utility of speaking French, especially for employment in Québec. The statistical data emphasizes this point: unilingual English-speaking Quebecers experience the worst employment and economic outcomes in the province. Given these strong negative and positive motivating factors to learn French, the persistence of unilingualism among English speakers may initially appear unclear.

The answer lies in the context. The current French language learning ecosystem is inadequate to meet demand, and that issues within the system have a chilling effect on learning motivations and outcomes. Further scholarship establishes that the current regulatory attitude that focuses on penalizing English speakers as well as individuals who are not proficient in French both exacerbates existing disparities and entrenches resentment. In combination, this suggests that continued unilingualism among English speakers is not an issue rooted within the English-speaking community itself; it is the source of regulatory and policy failures in the spheres of education, language, immigration, and employment that have not sufficiently supported French language learning.

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<https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/adm/min/immigration/publications-adm/acc-es-information/demandes-acces/2022/23094.pdf>.



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