



# Learning Disabilities in Québec: Potential Barriers in French Language Learning for English-Speaking Youth



*Author*

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**Helen Alder**

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## Context

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In Québec, students are often unaware they may have a learning disability (LDs) until they reach a collegiate level where the work demanded from them is more intense than in high school (Fichten, 2012, p.1). In 2010, it was found that 4.0% of college students from mother tongue English junior classes self-reported having a learning disability such as dyslexia (Fichten, 2013, p. 176). Currently, students from Québec with learning disabilities are considered part of an emerging clientele or known in French as a “clientèle émergente.” This happened because education systems have not always been accessible to those with disabilities. LDs, however, have been increasingly acknowledged over the past decades. LDs have been recognized since roughly before 1968 when the Journal of Learning Disabilities was founded in Canada despite the recent “emerging” populations with LDs (Fichten, 2013, p. 177).

Learning disabilities can take many forms, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. The latter two can exist in an individual with or without other conditions such as ADHD. The subtle forms these disabilities can take may contribute to the current underdiagnosis of Québec students.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Quebec notes that “the most common decoding problems are:

- Auditory or phonetic confusion
  - (spaghetti/spadetti)
- Reversals
  - (pacific/sapific)
- Omissions
  - (gasoline/gasline)
- Additions
  - (odor/order)
- Substitutions
  - (dress/drest)
- Slow, hesitant, choppy, syllable-by-syllable reading
- Difficulty dividing words into syllables
- Lack of awareness of punctuation”

(Fichten, 2013, p. 177).

## How does it affect English-speaking youth?

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An incident occurred wherein an English-speaking student, with a French surname, received the following comment from the professor on their term paper; “I understand that you Francophones have difficulty with spelling and sentence structure. But please, at least, refer to a dictionary” (Fichten, 2013, p. 177).

Situations like these are a sad reality for youth with learning disabilities in multilingual areas like Québec. Not just with writing or speaking in English, but also potentially in French.

A 2005 study from Dawson College found that 6% of graduates in vocational and career programs were persons with a disability. The number of those with a disability was 4% for university graduates with Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate programs. These statistics were lower than a post-secondary report in post-secondary education from 1999 which was 7% for those with disabilities (Jorgensen, 2005, p.103).

While it is reported that students in English CEGEPs often describe that their learning disabilities are managed with tools such as information and communications technologies (ICTs) since high school, most French colleges do not use them as much. There is a systemic linguistic difference in how students with learning disabilities are taught to use ICTs (Fichten, 2013, p. 177). However, with many English-speaking youths within the French schooling system, these youth risk their potential learning disabilities going unrecognized, as in French schools, it is under-reported.

Therefore, English-speaking students with learning disabilities within the French school system may fall short in language classes compared to their peers due to a lack of support that could be easily attained with ICTs in contrast to those in English schools.

Currently, within the English school system, children with special needs and learning disabilities tend to be enrolled in the regular “English-English” stream and hence follow the basic FSL curriculum which

provides only a minimal level of skills in French compared to their peers enrolled in a more bilingual stream of education with increased levels of French (Lamarre, 2012, p.188). Repeatedly, there have been attempts to bring attention to a needed increase in support for students with disabilities so they may qualify for and remain within bilingual programs to learn the language skills required to live and work in Québec (Lamarre, 2012, p.191-192).

### *Why is it important to implement aid?*

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Recently, Bill 96 was passed by Québec's National Assembly which encourages more French to be spoken and written.

However, Bill 96 affects the currently struggling English-speaking students with learning disabilities to speak and write in French more often than before the bill took place. In addition to the struggle, there is currently a lack of support for students in the French school system with learning disabilities (Fichten, 2012, p.1).

As previously stated, in English education, those with learning disabilities tend to have minimal French requirements in high school. Due to the limited spaces within English CEGEPs, the competition would increase and it is likely that youth with LDs may be outperformed in attaining these spots.

Bill 96's CEGEP requirement of three core French courses instead of two in English education will likely lower R-Scores for English-speaking students within the English CEGEPs systems for those who struggle with French.

Alternatively, students with LDs will likely be made to enter the French CEGEP system and thereby struggle due to both their disability and lack of advanced French courses during these formative years.

### *Support*

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It has been found that while they had practically identical grades and graduation outcomes, students

with learning disabilities took a semester longer to graduate and took lighter course loads in comparison to their peers (Jorgensen, 2005, p.101). This suggests that counselors need to bring greater attention to these students in order to consider higher education when developing their plans for the future. Means must be in place to make students aware of the disability-related services within post-secondary institutions (Jorgensen, 2005, p.101).

Many students are unaware they have a learning disability until they reach post-secondary education. Oftentimes, the increase in required readings, essay output, and other assignments can lead to the identification of a LD (Fichten, 2012, p.1). While it may be under-recognized in French-speaking colleges and universities, this does not mean it will not affect English-speaking students (Fichten, 2012, p.1).

A series of pilot projects by college-based LD experts like Lacasse have presented their findings on LD and information and communications technologies (ICTs). The Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sports (MELS) have funded a collaboration focusing on the inclusion of people with disabilities (Collaboration: Comité interordres – Intégrer les nouvelles populations en situation de handicap aux études supérieures : mission possible !) and commissioned a major research report on LD in colleges (Fichten, 2012, p.1).

Currently, Québec does not need a formal diagnosis from a psychologist or a psychiatrist to create Individualized Education Plans in primary or secondary schools (IEP) (D'intino, 2017, p.228). IEPs should be taken advantage of as much as possible so as to be able to tell which individuals need assistance sooner. In post-secondary education in Québec, a diagnosis from a healthcare professional is required for accommodations.

### *Recommendations*

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CEGEPs and universities should bring more attention to their offices for mental health and disabilities.



As suggested by Fichten and others, CEGEPs and Universities should hold an ICT fair to allow students to familiarize themselves with ICTs in an environment that frames ICTs as being a tool to help those with poor grades, rather than expose someone as disabled (Fichten, 2013, p. 185-186).

Providing access to ICTs would also be beneficial as some are very expensive. A list of accessible or inexpensive ICTs would help those that fear that money may be a factor in their budgets when they already have to consider their textbooks.

Universities should prioritize funding research regarding English-speaking youth with disabilities in language learning.

Below is a website to consider in order to prepare someone with a disability for college education:

<https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/support-students/students-disabilities-transitioning-secondary-school-college/getting-started-college-students-disabilities>

To summarize:

- CEGEPs and universities should bring more attention to their offices for mental health and disabilities
- CEGEPs and Universities should hold ICT fairs (Fichten, 2013, p. 185-186)
  - (This allows students to explore ICTs and does not expose someone as disabled)
- Access to ICTs through free or inexpensive resources
- Universities should conduct more research on the barriers surrounding language learning for English-speaking youth with disabilities
- Universities should have groups for students with LDs
- Students with LDs should consider looking at certain websites in order to prepare for post-secondary education, such as:
  - <https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/support-students/students-disabilities-transitioning-secondary-school-college/getting-started-college-students-disabilities>

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5165 Sherbrooke Street West,  
Suite 107  
Montréal, QC H4A 1T6



[info@y4yquebec.org](mailto:info@y4yquebec.org)



514-612-2895



[www.y4yquebec.org](http://www.y4yquebec.org)