



# LESSONS IN LEARNING

*Parlez-vous français?*  
The advantages of  
bilingualism in Canada

October 16, 2008

Canada has been officially bilingual since the passage of the Official Languages Act in 1969. While official bilingualism contributes to the richness of Canada's multicultural society, personal bilingualism confers a number of individual benefits, including economic benefits. Many Canadians are aware of these benefits; however, relatively few Canadians speak both of Canada's official languages.

## The benefits of personal bilingualism

The cognitive benefits of bilingualism are well-established.<sup>1</sup> For example, it has been shown that, compared to their monolingual peers, bilingual children are better able to focus their attention on relevant information and ignore irrelevant distractions.<sup>2,3</sup> Other research has shown that the effects of aging on the brain are diminished among bilingual adults.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to cognitive benefits, bilingualism can also confer economic advantages. In Canada, French/English bilingualism in particular carries important economic advantages for individuals who speak both official languages.

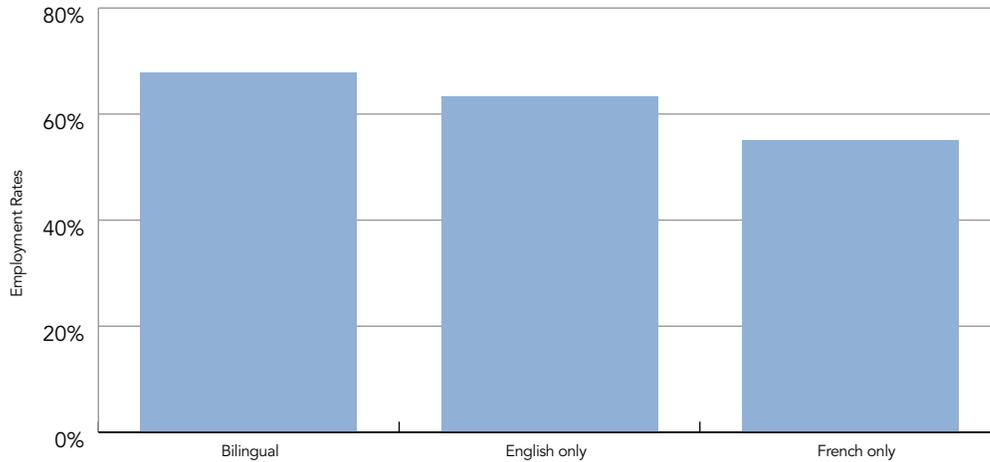
According to the 2006 Canadian census, employment rates are higher for French/English bilinguals than for French or English monolinguals (see Figure 1).

Across Canada, knowledge of both official languages represents a greater advantage in some geographic areas than in others. According to the 2006 census, the bilingual advantage is especially prevalent in cities such as Montreal (where the employment rate is 13 percentage points higher for bilinguals than for monolingual Francophones). There is a lower but still considerable advantage in cities like Toronto and Vancouver (see Figure 2).

*"Developing communicative competence in both of the official languages of Canada offers returns to the investment involved that go well beyond the normal ones that individuals expect. Not only does the individual him/herself benefit but the society as a whole and the political economy that is the product of that society benefit as well. In short, a more vibrant democracy with stronger webs of social affiliation is constructed."*

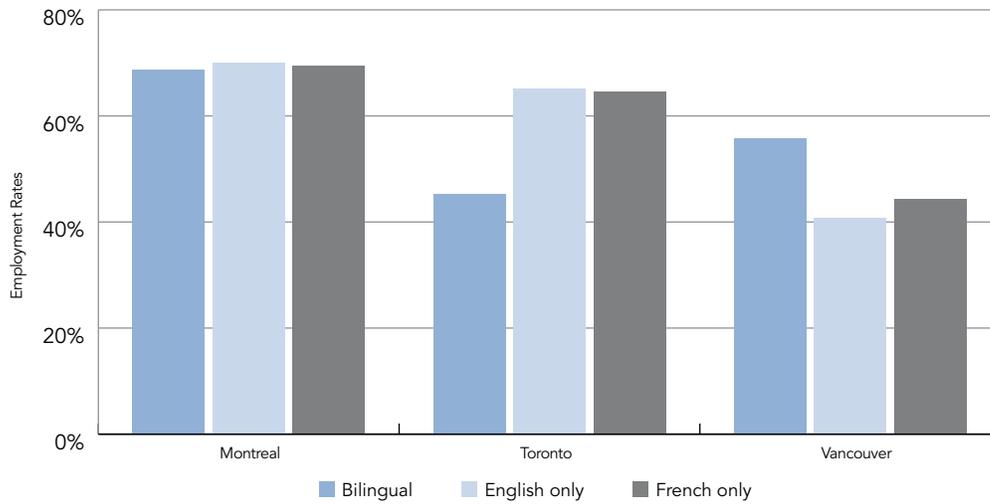
— Harold Chorney, Dept of Political Science, Concordia University

**Figure 1:**  
Employment rates for the population aged 15 and over.



Source: 2006 Canadian census – 20% Sample Data

**Figure 2:**  
Employment rates for the population aged 15 and over.

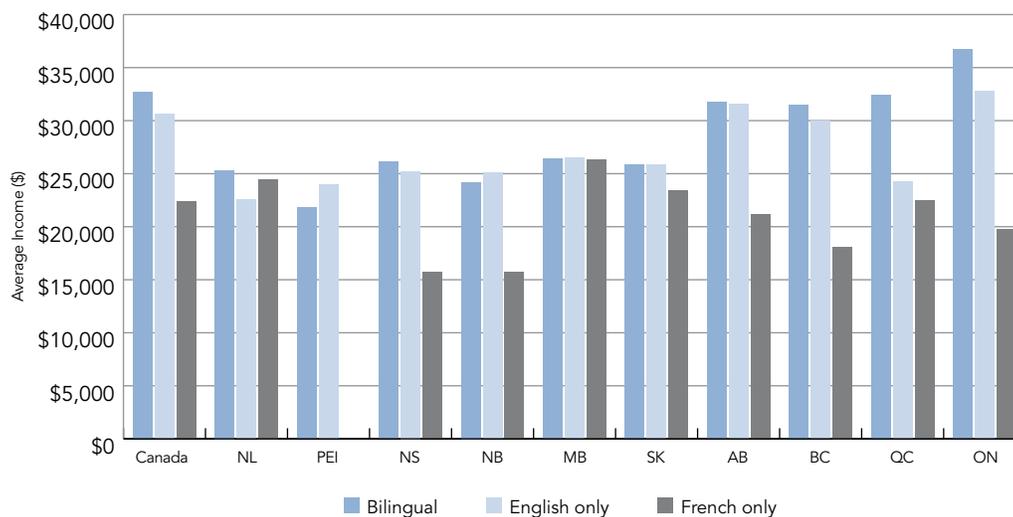


Source: 2006 Canadian census – 20% Sample Data

The bilingual advantage appears to extend to individual income. According to the 2001 Canadian census, people who speak both official languages had a median income (\$24,974) that was nearly 10% higher than that of those who speak English only (\$22,987) and 40% higher than that of those who speak French only (\$17,659). Similar gaps remain after controlling for individual characteristics such as educational attainment and work experience.<sup>5,6</sup>

The bilingualism premium varies as a function of factors such as place of residence, gender, and work sector.<sup>7</sup> The bilingual advantage is greatest in Quebec and Ontario and absent in other provinces (see Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> In 2001, personal incomes for bilingual Quebecers were \$8,000 to \$10,000 higher than for their monolingual counterparts. Bilingual Ontarians earned an average of nearly \$4,000 more than monolingual Anglophones.

**Figure 3:**  
Mean income by knowledge of official languages, 2001



Source: 2001 Canadian census (adapted from Jedwab, 2003)

The bilingual premium is slightly larger for women than for men. It is also larger for workers in the public sector than in the private sector, and larger in goods-producing sectors such as manufacturing, transportation and utilities compared than in the finance, services and trades sectors.<sup>9</sup>

### Awareness of the benefits of bilingualism among Canadians

Surveys of students, parents and employers indicate that many Canadians are aware of the economic benefits of bilingualism.

A recent nation-wide survey of more than 4,400 12- to 30-year-olds suggests that young people believe that improved employment opportunities are the

greatest advantage of having a working knowledge of both official languages.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, many graduates of French immersion programs report that French has been an asset in finding employment. For example, on a survey of French immersion graduates in Saskatchewan, 53% of the graduates report that their knowledge of French has helped them get a job.<sup>11</sup>

Parents also cite employability as one of the main reasons they value bilingualism for their children. According to the 2007 Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning (SCAL), nearly 60% of parents who have enrolled their children in language-immersion programs report that their reasons for doing so include increased job opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

From an employer's perspective, bilingualism among employees is seen as an asset. A recent web survey of 133 Canadian business leaders revealed that more than half (55%) believe that fluently bilingual job seekers are more employable than their monolingual counterparts.<sup>13</sup> Many occupations in business and administration, tourism, sports and recreation, and in sales and services identify bilingualism as a definite asset for job candidates.<sup>14</sup>

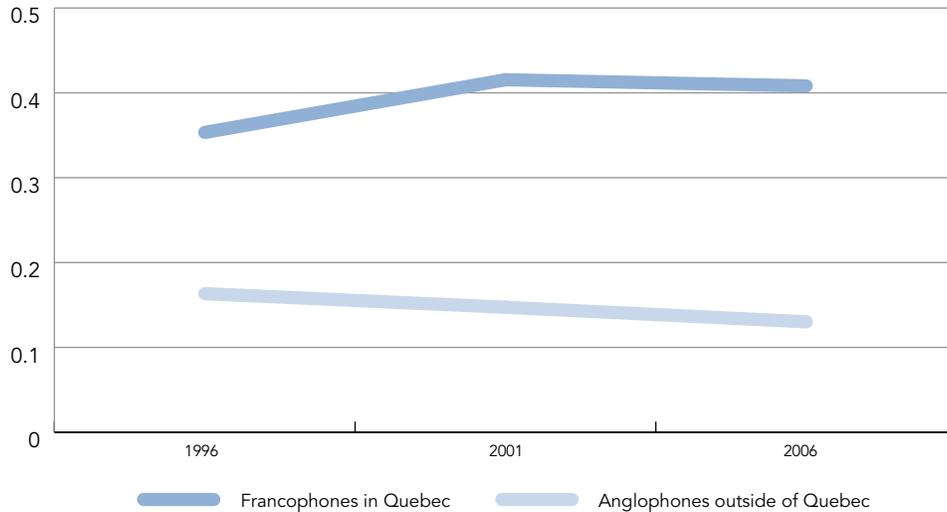
The growing number of occupations listing bilingualism as an asset has led to the development of websites dedicated to helping Canadian employers find bilingual candidates.<sup>15,16</sup> A survey of 63 Canadian companies (representing over 156,000 employees) across the country revealed that 84% of employers consider knowledge of English and French to be an asset or said that they give preference to English/French bilinguals.<sup>17</sup>

## **Rates of English/French bilingualism in Canada**

Despite their awareness of the economic benefits of bilingualism, relatively few Canadians can speak both official languages. English/French bilingualism is particularly rare among English-speaking Canadians: while 42% of Francophones report that they can speak English, only 9% of Anglophones report that they can speak French.<sup>18</sup>

Recognizing that the growth potential for English/French bilingualism lies primarily among young Canadians, the federal government's 2003 Action Plan for Official Languages calls for a doubling of the proportion of young Canadians (aged 15 to 19) who can speak both official languages by 2013.<sup>19</sup> Yet, even within this key demographic, rates of bilingualism are currently on a downward trend. Although young Canadians in minority-language contexts (i.e., Anglophones in Quebec and Francophones outside Quebec) have very high rates of bilingualism (over 80%), the same is not true for their majority-language counterparts. And the most recent census data indicate that bilingualism has stagnated for Francophones in Quebec and is on the decline for Anglophones outside of Quebec (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4:**  
Bilingualism among young majority-language speakers



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, and 2006 censuses

### Barriers to Bilingualism

Although most Canadian school children are taught English or French as a second language in school, these lessons often fail to yield functional bilingualism. For example, New Brunswick's French Second Language Commission recently reported that fewer than 1% of the students who enrolled in "core French" in 1994 had met the provincial minimum goal by 2007. And fewer than 10% of students who enrolled in early-French immersion in 1995 had attained the provincial goal by 2007.<sup>20</sup>

Even among students who do succeed in becoming bilingual, language skills are often quickly lost. Many learners of French as a second language (FSL) feel that their French skills, particularly their writing skills, deteriorate quickly when not used regularly.<sup>21</sup> Others see obstacles in pursuing French in university. Some of the most common reasons offered by French-immersion students for not taking French classes in university were timetable conflicts, the belief that their French skills were not strong enough, or the lack of suitable French courses at the university.<sup>22</sup>

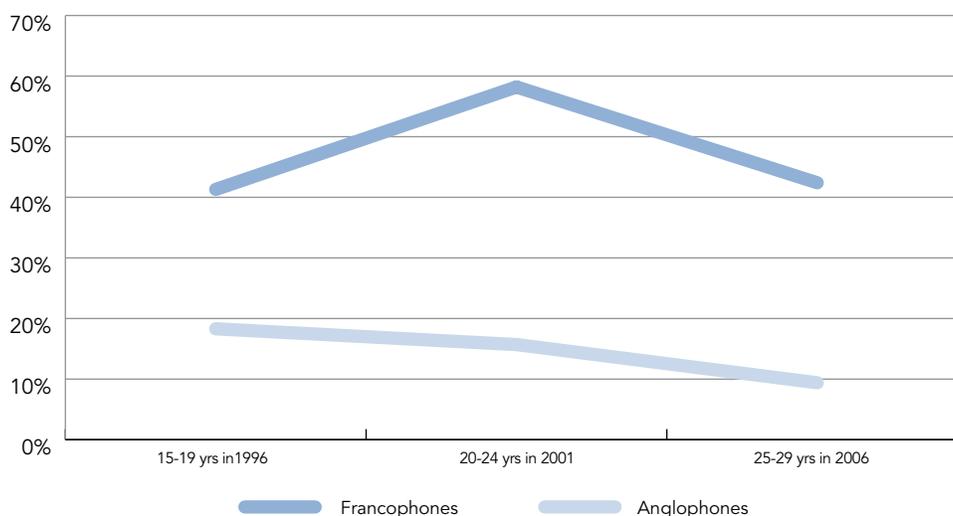
As a result of these barriers, many young FSL learners' abilities fade over time. The percentage of individuals who reported English as their only mother tongue, but also reported having knowledge of both official languages at age 15 to 19 in 1996

The two main approaches to teaching French as a second language in Canadian schools are French immersion and core French. In immersion, French is the medium—rather than the object—of instruction: most subjects (e.g., math, science, social studies) are taught in French. In contrast, core French is focussed specifically on acquiring French-language skills. Students in French immersion are typically exposed to a greater duration and intensity of French instruction than their peers in core French.

was 18.3%. Five years later, in 2001, the percentage of 20- to 24-year-olds who reported English as their only mother tongue as well as knowledge of both official languages dropped to 15.7% and, according to the latest census (2006), the rate for those aged 25 to 29 had dropped further to 9.4%. (See Figure 5.) These data indicate that knowledge of a second language, in this case French, tends to diminish with time, often because of lack of use.

The proportion of Francophones who report knowing English is more than double that of Anglophones who report knowing French (see Figure 5). There appears to be fewer barriers for Francophones to maintain their acquired English skills. Unlike the Anglophone cohort, the percentage of Francophones who reported knowledge of English has increased from 41.3% when they were 15 to 19 years of age (in 1996) to 58.2% when they were 20 to 24 years of age (in 2001), to fall back to slightly above 1996 levels at 42.4% five years later (see Figure 5).<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 5:** Percentage of a cohort of Anglophones and Francophones who reported knowledge of both official languages in 1996, 2001, and 2006



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996, 2001, and 2006 censuses

Second-language learners, especially Anglophone FSL learners, must find ways to maintain and continue to improve their acquired language skills if they want to hold on to the advantage they have gained by learning their second language.

### Lessons in Learning: How to maintain the bilingual advantage

One way for FSL learners to maintain French-language skills acquired in elementary and high school is to continue French instruction in post-secondary education. For example, the University of Ottawa offers French immersion in over 50 programs of study and many other universities across the country offer courses where French is the language of instruction. These programs often include a variety of support services to help Anglophone students studying in French.<sup>24</sup>

For high school, college, or university students aged 16 years or more, interesting opportunities are available through the Young Canada Works in Both Official Languages program. This federally funded program provides young Canadians with summer employment opportunities to gain work experiences in fields related to their studies while improving their second-language skills. A similar program (Young Canada Works at Building Careers in English and French) is available for bilingual graduates looking for 6- to 12-month internships in fields that promote Canada's linguistic duality.

Another possibility for high-school students involves participating in exchange programs in French-speaking communities such as the ones organized by the Society for Educational Visits and Exchange in Canada (SEVEC). Some exchange programs take place during the school year, while others are available during the summer months. Similar exchange programs are offered by 4-H Youth Exchange Canada and the YMCA Youth Exchange Canada programs. The British Columbia/Québec – Six Month Bilingual Exchange Program offers grade 10 and 11 students the opportunity to study in the other province for three months while receiving credits towards graduation. The Explore summer language bursary program, offered across the country, is a five-week immersion program for students who have completed high school.

By making their second language an integral part of everyday life, second-language learners can help maintain their language skills. This can be achieved by building relationships with other speakers of the language, by getting involved with associations in the linguistic community or travelling to communities where the language is spoken. Other simple ways of incorporating the second language into daily routine include listening to radio, watching television, and reading in the second language daily. These efforts will help ensure that second-language learners maintain the language skills they have acquired, allowing them to enjoy fully the economic advantages of being bilingual.

The Action Plan for Official Languages ended in March 2008 and was replaced by a new plan called the "Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality". The consultation process that contributed to the development of the Roadmap yielded a number of recommendations for the successful advancement of linguistic duality in Canada. These recommendations focus on four areas: education, immigration, health, and arts and culture.

Education (from Kindergarten all the way through to postsecondary) remains a key aspect of fostering bilingualism across Canada. Maintaining Canada's linguistic duality will require emphasis on both minority language education and second-language education in both official languages. Minority language communities can make important contributions with respect to welcoming and integrating new immigrants, but they will require additional support in providing services to newcomers. In order to maintain the vitality of minority language communities, these communities will require improved access to health care services. Finally, the richness of Canada's linguistic duality requires continued support for the arts and cultures of Anglophone and Francophone communities.

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