

Bilingual College Education: A Motivating Option for French-Speaking Students?

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This article features results from a research project aimed to study the perception of young people enrolled in a bilingual DCS program in order to validate whether taking courses in both French and English had a significant influence on their academic motivation.¹

For further details, please consult: Rompré, H. (2022). [*L'enseignement bilingue au collégial : perception des étudiants et aspects motivationnels*](#). Collégial international Sainte-Anne.

Background

Bilingual Education: A Rare Option in the Québec College Network

For decades, voices have been raised to deplore the decline of interest among young Francophones and allophones in French-language post-secondary education, calling for government measures to curb the linguistic exodus, particularly in CEGEPs (Lacroix, 2020). In the process, Bill 96, whose objective is to ensure the sustainability of the French language, proposes, among other things, restrictions on admission to English-speaking college institutions in the province of Québec (National Assembly, 2021). Political and media debates rarely mention another type of pathway: bilingual education programs. Yet, such programs currently exist in the private college network. At Collégial international Sainte-Anne, located on the island of Montréal, general education is provided in French and a few specific courses are offered in English.

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It is relevant to ask what motivates students to follow a bilingual study program. What are their perceptions of the benefits of bilingualism? What challenges will they encounter in their college studies?

Educational research shows that motivated students find courses' content useful, participate in learning activities and are more persistent (Viau, 2010). In this sense, a person's positive perception of the content of their learning shapes their desire to succeed in their studies.

Key Concept

What is Bilingual Education?

Bilingual education is the delivery of certain courses in a language other than the students' native language (Kim, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2015). It is important to distinguish bilingual education from linguistic enrichment or «intensive» programs, which aim to add more language instruction hours to the curriculum (Ministère de l'éducation, n.d.), as here we are not only talking about language courses. While bilingual education is used worldwide in primary and secondary schools to facilitate the acquisition of a second language in children, the effectiveness of this model in adults remains understudied (Pilotti, Gutierrez, Klein, & Mahamame, 2015).



Methodology

Qualitative Research to Identify Students' Perceptions of Their Study Program

🔍 Type of research: Qualitative

👤 Study population: 17 students from Collégial international Sainte-Anne who define themselves as French speakers and who speak French at home. These young people were aged 17 to 20 at the time of the research.

📍 Place and period of research: 17 semi-directed individual interviews conducted in fall 2021 and 15 interviews conducted in winter 2022 with the same students from Collégial international Sainte-Anne in Montréal.

The goal was to allow young people talk about their experience in a bilingual college education program while asking them about their sources of motivation, their perception of the advantages of bilingualism and the challenges encountered in their studies. The interviews were transcribed and the main themes as well as the sub-themes of the accounts were noted.

Results

A Positive Perception of Bilingual Education... Despite Some Challenges

1

English: A Language Perceived as Necessary for Social Success.

All learners noted a significant improvement in their English skills throughout their college studies. They reported being motivated to attend their classes because they felt they were learning a language that would be useful for admission to a university program of choice, work, travelling and opening up to the world (see Table 1 for full data). Michele², for example, confided:

“You can do anything when you know the English language, in the sense that you’re going to go to a country where it’s not their first language but there’s always someone who’s going to speak English.”

Young people demonstrated personal motivation to improve their second language skills. Parental pressure, for its part, seems to have played a minor role in choosing the bilingual program, as it only concerns 8 out of 17 young people.

² To ensure confidentiality, first names are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Participants' Sources of Motivation to Study in a Bilingual College Program

Sources of Motivation	Number of Respondents (out of 17)
1. Labour Market	
Having a competitive edge at work	12
Having access to the world of science	4
Having access to the world of politics	1
Earning a higher salary	2
Running your own business	2
2. University Studies	
Having a better record to be admitted to a university program	3
Attending university in English	10
Attending university in the United States	3
Attending top schools in France	2
3. Travels	
6	
4. Meeting Others	
Living abroad	5
Learning about other cultures	9
Being able to communicate with people anywhere	14
Accessing various media (e.g., social networks, original TV series in English)	4
5. Personal Fulfillment	
Improving oneself, being an outgoing person	9
Being more motivated in one's studies	3
Feeling reassured while learning English	10
Being proud of oneself	5
Overcoming one's fear of having more difficulties in French because of anglicisms	7

Source: Rompré, H. (2022). L'enseignement bilingue au collégial: perception des étudiants et aspects motivationnels. Collégial international Sainte-Anne.

2

A Program Adapted to the French-Speaking Student Population.

Participants described their bilingual classrooms as safe environments since French-speaking students learn with other French-speaking students, as Jean-René explains:

“We are less afraid to speak in front of the group because everyone is at a comparable level, it is less embarrassing than in front of a group of English speakers.”

They appreciated having understanding teachers used to interacting with French speakers. Respondents also said they were happy to take some more demanding courses in their mother tongue; courses requiring reading and writing skills, such as philosophy, history and biology.

For several of them, bilingualism was an excellent compromise since they felt a certain social pressure to improve their English skills, while the bilingual program also allowed them to maintain a high level of French. In addition, they appreciated having the opportunity to submit their work in French, even in courses taught in a second language. Finally, the pedagogical format offered them the possibility of improving their English without having to worry that their R score (college performance rating) would be too affected by the fact that they were taking certain courses in a second language.

3

Bilingual Education: A Choice that Involves Challenges.

Participants reported two main problems related to bilingual education (see Table 2 for full data). On the one hand, language anxiety, or even shame, of expressing oneself orally in imperfect language was noted by 8 out of 17 people. Some of them were even hesitant to ask questions in English to the teachers. Mélanie, for example, revealed that she didn't participate as much in class:

“It's certain that if it's a course in English, I'm much less likely to speak because even if I understand English well, I have more difficulty expressing myself in English, because I never practice.”

On the other hand, «Franglais» or linguistic ambiguity (alternating between the two languages by mixing the two) is a problem raised by all respondents, without exception. However, according to Nathalie, after a while, you get used to this new reality:

“It switches in my head quite easily.”

Table 2
Participants' Sources of Motivation or Demotivation to Study in a Bilingual College Program

Sources of Motivation or Demotivation	Number of Respondents (out of 17)
Language anxiety (fear of making mistakes)	8
Linguistic ambiguity (Franglais, back and forth)	5
Difficulty following at first/language shock	6
Fear of seeing one's skills in French decrease	1
Negative impact on grades	2
Difficulty following courses online	1

Source: Rompré, H. (2022). L'enseignement bilingue au collégial: perception des étudiants et aspects motivationnels. Collégial international Sainte-Anne.

What Can we Learn from our Results?

Bilingual Education: An Avenue to Consider Under Certain Conditions

1

There are Benefits to Opening up to Bilingual Education.

Currently, Québec colleges are categorized as “French-speaking” or “English-speaking” (National Assembly, 2021). Bilingual education is a marginal, even experimental, phenomenon within the private network. Our research shows that many French-speaking college students want to improve their English skills, but the idea of leaving their mother tongue behind is unappealing. To avoid a linguistic exodus to English-speaking institutions while allowing young people to improve their language skills, it would be possible to offer programs where some courses are taken in English.

2

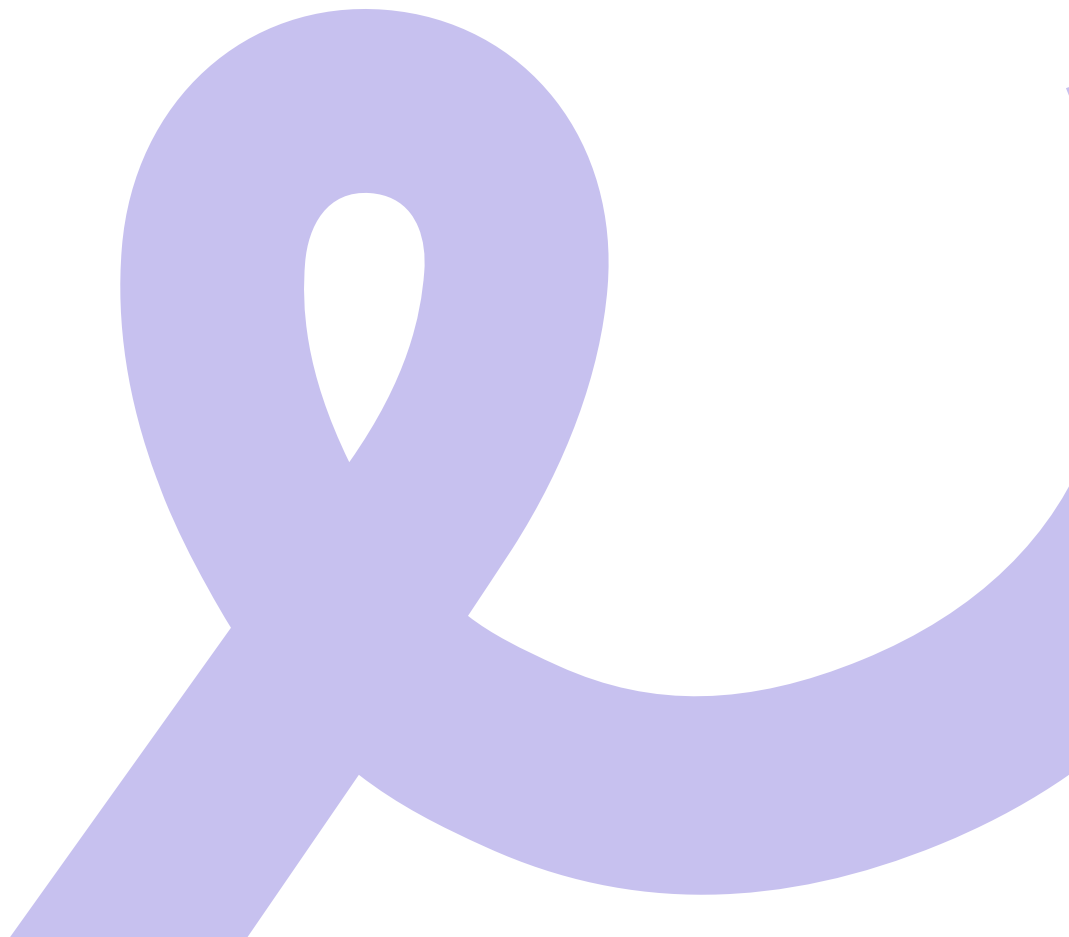
Bilingual Education Represents an Avenue to Consider for English-Speaking College Institutions.

The English-speaking college network would also benefit from implementing such programs so that the English-speaking student population would be more comfortable looking for jobs in the province of Québec, where French is generally present. According to our participants’ accounts, bilingual education allows people to express themselves at a high level in French and English at the end of a two-year diploma of college studies (DCS). This skill is valued in the labour market: people who are proficient in both of Canada’s official languages have higher salaries than unilingual people (Conference Board of Canada, 2018).

3

The Creation of Bilingual Programs Must Take into Account the Challenges Reported by Students.

Bilingual education programs should be geared toward people who volunteer and who are personally motivated to improve their second language skills. The implementation of such programs should take into account the challenges reported by students. Care should be taken, when training teaching staff, to raise awareness about the reality of language anxiety in a second language.



Courses of Action

- ✓ Offer bilingual programs to people who volunteer without making them compulsory.
- ✓ Opt for general education in students' mother tongue (particularly philosophy, a subject which involves reading and understanding more complex philosophical texts) and specific courses in a second or third language.
- ✓ Train staff in language didactics and make them fully aware of the challenges of bilingual education.
- ✓ Reduce sources of stress for students who choose to take a course in a second or third language by taking measures to alleviate language anxiety (e.g., mentoring, language help centre, reducing the weight of second language assessments in the calculation of the general average).
 - ◇ For example, at the University of Ottawa, English speakers are encouraged to take courses in French without fear of being penalized. Second language courses are credited, but do not count toward their overall GPA (Flynn, 2018).
- ✓ Promote exchanges, exchange programs and linguistic twinning between French-speaking and English-speaking institutions.
 - ◇ A few college initiatives have already proven that activities promoting exchanges between two ethnolinguistic communities increase the motivation to learn a second language (Gagné & Deveau, 2021; Popica, 2020).

Lines of Research

- ✓ Validate whether the bilingual pathway has a quantifiable impact on academic success. For example, is there an impact on academic results, on the quality of texts produced in French and on success rates at the *Épreuve uniforme de français*?
- ✓ Validate whether bilingualism in education impairs the quality of graduates' French skills in order to ensure that such programs do not compromise the preservation of the French language.
- ✓ Continue work on bilingual education in colleges and universities, while also showing interest in English-speaking, allophone and First People student populations.
- ✓ Validate whether the academic motivation of people enrolled in a bilingual program is similar outside of the greater Montréal area, where English is omnipresent.
- ✓ Compare the experience of young French speakers who have opted for a bilingual program to that of French speakers who have enrolled in a unilingual English program to see if they experience similar challenges.
- ✓ Follow participants throughout their academic pathway and in their early career in order to reflect on the impact of bilingualism on their personal and professional journey.

For Further Reading

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Biographical Note

Since she began teaching history at the college level in 2006, **Hélène Rompré** has had the opportunity to teach this subject in French, in English and in a bilingual context, to French-speaking, English-speaking and allophone students. She studied communications (Concordia University) and literature (Université du Québec à Montréal), and holds a doctorate in history from the Université de Montréal. She now teaches at Collégial international Sainte-Anne, a private college located in Lachine where she continues her research in the field of bilingual education.



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