

**Decoding the Promise: Why Alberta Should Teach Core French**  
**The Way It Teaches Children to Read**

*Structured Literacy, Linguistic Awareness, and Canada's Unfinished  
Commitment to Official Bilingualism*

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## **Abstract**

Canada has been formally bilingual for more than half a century, yet the rate of English–French bilingualism outside Quebec has been declining since 2001. This essay argues that a substantial part of the problem in Western Canada is pedagogical rather than political. Alberta has committed itself, in its early English literacy policy, to a structured and explicit account of how letters map onto sounds. It has made no equivalent commitment in Core French. This is an incoherence, and a costly one, because French orthography is measurably more predictable in the reading direction than English orthography is. Drawing on psycholinguistic research into orthographic consistency, classroom intervention studies in second-language decoding, and the literature on cross-linguistic transfer and morphological awareness, the essay makes the case for teaching Core French in Kindergarten to Grade 5 through explicit phonics, phonemes, digraphs, and trigraphs, embedded in a broader framework of linguistic and historical awareness. It also clarifies, rather than overstates, the constitutional position: section 23 of the Charter does not confer a universal right to French instruction on every Alberta child, but sections 16(3) and 23, read alongside the Official Languages Act and two and a half centuries of legal history, establish a governmental commitment to advancing both official languages that current Core French provision does not honour.

## 1. Introduction

Ask an Alberta student who has completed six years of Core French to read aloud a French word they have never seen before, *oiseau*, say, or *longtemps*, and the result is frequently a guess assembled from English habits. The student may know a hundred memorized phrases and still have no reliable procedure for turning an unfamiliar string of French letters into French sounds. This is not a marginal deficiency. Decoding is the mechanism by which a learner converts written input into the phonological form that vocabulary learning, listening comprehension, and, eventually, speech all depend on. A learner who cannot decode is locked out of independent progress in the language.

The argument of this essay is that the failure is one of method rather than of aptitude, effort, or exposure time alone. Alberta has, over the past several years, moved decisively toward structured, explicit, systematic instruction in the sound–symbol relationships of English for its youngest readers, backed by mandatory screening. It has made no corresponding move in French as a second language. Students are taught, in one classroom, that written language is a decipherable code governed by rules worth learning explicitly; and in the next classroom, that French is a set of phrases to be memorized whole, with its spelling treated as a decorative accident. The incoherence is the problem.

This essay makes three claims. First, that French orthography is, in the direction that matters for reading, substantially more regular than English orthography, and is therefore unusually well suited to explicit phonics instruction. Second, that a growing body of classroom intervention research supports explicit decoding instruction in second-language French, and that this instruction is cheap in time and compatible with communicative teaching rather than opposed

to it. Third, that Canada's constitutional and statutory framework, properly understood, creates a governmental commitment to advancing both official languages that the present state of Core French in the West does not satisfy, even though, as I will argue, that framework does not create the individual entitlement that public debate often assumes it does.

## **2. A Commitment Older Than the Country**

The legal relationship between English and French in what is now Canada begins in conquest. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, issued after the cession of New France, established English civil and criminal law in the new Province of Quebec and, through the requirement of the Test Oath, effectively excluded Catholics, that is, nearly the entire French-speaking population, from public office. Its assimilationist intent was explicit. That intent proved unworkable within a decade. The Quebec Act, 1774, restored French civil law and religious freedom and, in doing so, established the durable Canadian pattern of accommodating rather than eliminating linguistic duality.

Section 133 of the Constitution Act, 1867 gave that pattern its first entrenched constitutional form, guaranteeing the use of English and French in Parliament, the Quebec legislature, and the courts of both. It is worth noting what section 133 did not do: it said nothing about education, which section 93 assigned to the provinces. That division of powers is the reason a national commitment to bilingualism has always had to be translated into thirteen separate provincial and territorial policies, with predictably uneven results.

The modern framework emerged from the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, whose recommendations Pierre Trudeau's government implemented through the Official Languages Act (1969). The Act made English and French the official languages of Canada, recognized their equal status in federal institutions, and guaranteed the right to federal services in the language of one's choice (Canadian Heritage, n.d.). Thirteen years later, the

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms constitutionalized much of this. Section 16 declares the equality of status of English and French; section 16(3) provides that nothing in the Charter limits the authority of Parliament or a legislature to advance the equality of status or use of the two languages. Section 23 confers minority language educational rights.

Section 23 has been given a generous reading. In *Mahe v. Alberta* (1990), an Alberta case, the Supreme Court held that section 23 entails not merely instruction in the minority language, but a degree of management and control by the minority community over that instruction, including representation on, or the creation of, school boards. The Court read the section purposively, as a remedial provision designed to redress past assimilation and to preserve minority-language communities.

### **3. What the Charter Guarantees, and What It Does Not**

Precision matters here, and the argument is stronger for conceding the point. Section 23 is a rights-holder provision. It grants rights to a defined class of Canadian citizens: those whose first language learned and still understood is that of the province's linguistic minority, those who received their primary education in Canada in that language, and those with a child already educated in that language in Canada. It is a guarantee of French-first-language education for members of the Franco-Albertan community. It is not, and has never been held to be, a guarantee that every anglophone child in Alberta has a constitutional right to learn French as a second language.

This distinction is routinely blurred in public argument, and blurring it invites easy refutation. A claim that Alberta is in breach of the Charter by offering weak Core French would not survive a first-year constitutional law seminar. Core French is a provincial curricular choice, and education is a provincial head of power under section 93.

The stronger claim, and the accurate one, is this. Section 16(3) is not a right but an authorization and an aspiration: it expressly contemplates legislative action to advance the equality of status and use of English and French. Part VII of the Official Languages Act gives effect to that subsection, committing the federal government to enhancing the vitality of official language communities and to fostering the full recognition and use of both languages in Canadian society (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2024). Ottawa has backed that commitment with money: the Action Plan for Official Languages 2023–2028 allocated more than \$4.1 billion, including \$242.8 million from 2024–25 specifically for French second-language learning (Canadian Heritage, 2023).

So, the question is not whether Alberta students have a justiciable right to good Core French. It is why a country that has spent sixty years and billions of dollars building an architecture of official bilingualism, and that funds second-language learning specifically, continues to deliver that learning through methods that measurably fail. The census data suggest the answer is not encouraging: the rate of English-French bilingualism outside Quebec fell from 10.3% in 2001 to 9.5% in 2021, and among those with English as a mother tongue, it declined from 9.2% to 9.0% between 2016 and 2021 alone (Statistics Canada, 2022). Whatever the constitutional architecture promises, it is not being delivered in the West.

#### **4. The Linguistic Case: French Is Built for Decoding**

The most surprising fact in this argument is that French spelling is easier than English spelling in exactly the way that matters for a beginning reader.

Orthographies can be inconsistent in two independent directions. *Feedforward* inconsistency concerns reading: given a written form, how predictable is its pronunciation? *Feedback* inconsistency concerns spelling: given a sound, how predictable is its written form?

Ziegler, Jacobs, and Stone (1996) analyzed French monosyllabic words at the rime level and found a dramatic asymmetry. Only 12.4% of French words were inconsistent in the reading direction, while 79.1% were inconsistent in the spelling direction. French, in other words, is a language you can read far more reliably than you can spell.

This is the opposite of the intuition most English-speaking adults carry, and it has a direct pedagogical consequence. If the goal is for a child to look at a French word and produce the correct sounds, French is a comparatively tractable code. The rules are numerous but finite and highly reliable. English, by contrast, is inconsistent in both directions, which is precisely why systematic phonics instruction had to be fought for so hard in English-language classrooms and why Ziegler and Goswami (2005) argued that orthographies of differing depth push learners toward different “grain sizes” of processing.

What would a French phonics sequence contain? Much the same architecture Alberta already uses in English, with different contents:

**Phonemes and single graphemes.** French has roughly thirty-six phonemes, several with no English equivalent: the front rounded vowels of *tu* and *peu*, the uvular *r*, and the nasal vowels. Children who are never told these sounds exist substitute the nearest English phoneme and fossilize the substitution.

**Digraphs.** Two letters, one sound: *ou* as in *nous*; *ai* as in *lait*; *oi* as in *moi*; *ch* as in *chat*; *an*, *on*, *in* as nasal vowels. Each of these is a stable, teachable unit.

**Trigraphs and quadrigraphs.** Three or four letters, one sound: *eau* in *bateau*; *ain* in *pain*; *eil* in *soleil*; *ien* in *bien*; *eaux* in *oiseaux*. French is unusually rich in these multi-letter graphemes, which is exactly why word-shape guessing fails and why explicit instruction pays.

**Positional and morphological rules.** Final consonants are usually silent (*petit, grand, temps*) but resurface in liaison and in the feminine (*petite, grande*). The plural *-s* and the third-person plural *-ent* are silent. These are not exceptions; they are systematic patterns with an explanation.

## 5. Teaching the Why: History as Pedagogy

A user learns code faster when it makes sense. This is the second half of the proposal: that French spelling becomes intelligible, rather than arbitrary, when students are told where it came from.

French is a Romance language, the descendant of the spoken Latin of Gaul. Its written form preserves stages of that descent long after the pronunciation moved on (Rickard, 1989; Posner, 1997). A child who is told that *temps* come from Latin *tempus*, and that the silent letters are a fossil of a pronunciation that has faded, has been handed a general principle rather than a single fact. So too with *hôpital* and *hospital*, *école* and *school*, *forêt* and *forest*: the circumflex marks, with striking regularity, the ghost of a lost *s*. Once a student sees that, they can predict a whole class of English–French cognates from a single diacritic.

This is not antiquarianism. It is a route into what the research literature calls morphological awareness, sensitivity to the meaningful sub-word units from which words are built. Morphological awareness is a robust predictor of literacy outcomes, with the strength of the relationship varying by the orthographic depth of the language involved (Lee, Wolters, & Kim, 2023). Crucially, it can be taught, and it crosses languages. Crosson, McKeown, Moore, and Ye (2019) found that explicit instruction in Latin roots produced significant gains in academic word learning for adolescent English learners, and that the effects generalized beyond the taught items. Deacon, Wade-Woolley, and Kirby (2007) demonstrated a genuine crossover effect in Canadian French immersion children: morphological awareness in one language predicted reading in the other.

The theoretical account of why this happens is well established. Cummins (1979) proposed that linguistic competence is developmentally interdependent across a bilingual's languages, drawing on a common underlying proficiency: skills built in one language are not sequestered there. Subsequent work has confirmed that phonological awareness behaves as a language-general skill that transfers between alphabetic languages. The instructional implication is that a French phonics programme in Grade 2 is not competing with English literacy for scarce cognitive resources. It is likely to be reinforcing it, by making the very idea of a sound–symbol system visible in two instantiations rather than one, and by supplying the comparative contrast that turns implicit habit into explicit knowledge.

## **6. What the Intervention Research Shows**

The case for structured phonics in first-language English reading is among the best evidenced in education. The National Reading Panel's meta-analysis found that systematic phonics instruction produced significant benefits over unsystematic or no-phonics approaches, with the largest effects for younger children (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). The second-language evidence base is younger and thinner, but it points in the same direction, and it is specifically about French.

Erler and Macaro (2011), working with English-speaking learners of French, documented poor phonological decoding proficiency among beginners and found that decoding ability was significantly associated with motivation and with the decision to continue studying French. Woore (2009) tracked beginners longitudinally and found little spontaneous improvement in decoding over time in the absence of explicit teaching; learners persisted in applying English grapheme–phoneme correspondences to French text. Macaro and Erler (2008) showed that a fourteen-month programme of explicit strategy instruction with young beginners produced measurable gains in reading comprehension and in attitudes toward the language.

The most directly relevant study is the Foreign Language Education: Unlocking Reading (FLEUR) project, a randomized controlled trial funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted with Year 7 learners of French (Woore, Graham, Porter, Courtney, & Savoury, 2018). FLEUR compared explicit phonics instruction, reading strategy instruction, and the use of challenging texts. Two findings matter here. First, phonics instruction supported vocabulary learning: the engine of language progress. Second, the time spent on phonics did not come at the expense of progress in reading comprehension. The intervention was delivered in short discrete segments of lesson time and was well received by teachers and students.

That last point deserves emphasis, because the most common objection to this proposal is that instructional time is finite. The evidence suggests that the cost is small. Macaro and Erler found benefits from roughly ten minutes of explicit reading instruction per week. This is not a proposal to displace communicative teaching; it is a proposal to spend a few minutes a week making the code explicit so that the communicative work has something to build on.

Set this against the Canadian outcome data. Research on Core French has consistently found weak returns for time invested. Reviewing national testing of Grade 8 and Grade 12 Core French students conducted across seven provinces and territories, Lapkin, Harley, and Taylor (1993) reported that Grade 8 performance was largely unrelated to the grade in which French instruction had begun or to the total number of years of study. A programme in which duration does not predict proficiency has a design problem, not a dosage problem.

## **7. Alberta's Asymmetry**

Alberta's English-language early literacy policy has accepted the structured literacy argument. Literacy and numeracy screening became mandatory for Grades 1 to 3 in 2022–23 and was expanded to include Kindergarten, and the approved screening instruments assess precisely the

sub-lexical skills that structured phonics instruction targets: letter-name and letter-sound knowledge, phonemic awareness, and decoding (Government of Alberta, 2025). Whatever one thinks of the administrative burden of screening, the underlying premise is sound and evidence-aligned: children learn to read faster when the code is taught explicitly and when those who are not acquiring it are identified early.

No equivalent premise operates in French as a second language. Alberta's nine-year FSL programme of studies begins in Grade 4, is organized around communicative outcomes, and contains no systematic scope and sequence for French grapheme–phoneme correspondences comparable to what now governs English literacy in the same building. Nor is second-language study universally required: Calgary's public board eliminated its mandatory second-language requirement for Grades 4 to 9 in 2011, and provision below Grade 7 is a local decision.

The result is an instructional sequencing failure. Alberta teaches its most systematic, most explicit, most research-aligned literacy instruction in kindergarten to Grade 3, exactly the window in which phonological plasticity is greatest and in which children are already primed to think about sounds and symbols, and then introduces French in Grade 4, after that window has narrowed and after the English code has become automatic enough to interfere. The proposal that follows is, in essence, to align the two.

## **8. Objections and Limits**

Intellectual honesty requires acknowledging what this argument cannot claim.

The evidence does not establish that phonics produces fluency. Decoding is a component skill. It supports vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and motivation, and its absence impedes all three; but no study shows that adding phonics to Core French would produce functionally bilingual graduates. Fluency in a second language is overwhelmingly a function of

quantity and quality of meaningful input and interaction, which is why immersion outperforms Core French. A phonics-first Core French would be a better Core French, not a substitute for immersion.

The evidence base is also geographically and developmentally displaced from the proposal. Erler, Macaro, and Woore worked with secondary-age learners in England. FLEUR studied Year 7 students. To my knowledge, there is no randomized trial of systematic French phonics in Canadian K–5 Core French classrooms. Extending findings from eleven-year-olds in England to six-year-olds in Alberta is a reasonable inference, not a demonstrated result, and the honest form of this argument is a call for a provincial pilot with proper evaluation rather than a claim that the answer is already known.

There are further practical constraints. Canada faces a documented shortage of qualified French-as-a-second-language teachers, and many current Core French teachers were not themselves trained in French phonetics or historical linguistics (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2019). A curriculum reform without a corresponding investment in teacher preparation would produce the familiar pattern of a good idea implemented badly and then blamed for failing. And there is a genuine pedagogical risk in over-correcting: a French class that becomes an exercise in sounding out nonsense words, detached from meaning and communication, would trade one impoverished model for another. Woore and colleagues themselves concluded that integrating phonics and strategies with engaging texts is more promising than any of these in isolation.

Finally, the communicative approach that dominates Core French was itself a corrective to something worse. The grammar-translation methods it displaced produced students who could parse a sentence and not order a coffee. Nothing here is a call to return to that. The claim is

narrower: that in rejecting decontextualized grammar drill, second-language teaching threw out the explicit teaching of the writing system along with it, and that this was an error.

## **9. A Proposal**

A coherent reform for Alberta would have five components.

**Begin French in Kindergarten, not Grade 4,** and align its phonological content with the English literacy sequence already in place, not as a translation of it, but as a parallel track that makes the comparative structure of the two codes visible.

**Publish a scope and sequence for French graphemes,** moving from single letters through digraphs to trigraphs, with nasal vowels and silent-final-consonant patterns taught explicitly rather than absorbed by chance.

**Embed a linguistics strand appropriate to each grade:** cognate recognition in the primary years, the circumflex-as-lost-s rule and basic Latin roots in the middle years, and an introduction to sound change and language families before students leave elementary school. The aim is metalinguistic transfer: students who can approach a third language with a working theory of how writing systems behave.

**Invest in teacher preparation,** including French phonetics and the history of the language, in initial teacher education and in-service professional learning. This is the component most likely to be skipped and most likely to determine whether the reform works.

**Pilot and evaluate before scaling.** Federal Action Plan funding for French second-language learning exists precisely to support this kind of work. A multi-year, randomized, adequately powered Alberta trial would answer a question that currently has no Canadian answer, and would be of national value regardless of its result.

## 10. Conclusion

Canada's bilingualism is not a decoration. It is the outcome of a two-hundred-and-sixty-year negotiation that runs from the Royal Proclamation's failed assimilation, through the Quebec Act's accommodation, to the Official Languages Act and the Charter. Section 23 secures the education of the francophone minority; section 16(3) and Part VII of the Official Languages Act commit governments to advancing both languages more broadly. Neither gives an Alberta anglophone child a right to demand better Core French in court. Both make it difficult to defend, as a matter of policy, the continued delivery of second-language instruction by methods that research does not support, and outcome data do not vindicate.

The specific failure is small, technical, and fixable. Alberta already knows how to teach a writing system explicitly; it does so every morning in its English classrooms. French is, by the available evidence, a more predictable system to read than English. The gap between what the province knows about teaching reading and what it does about teaching French is not a knowledge gap. It is a gap in application and closing it would cost a few minutes a week.

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