

Chronology: monolingual instruction in France?

Debate

Language of instruction

French has long been the sole medium of instruction in nearly all of France's state schools—despite the fact that there are a number of regional languages in the country and numerous immigrant communities.

France has some [two dozen regional languages and dialects](#), seven of which are officially recognized: Corsican, Breton, Gallo, Basque, Franco-Provençal, Occitan and Catalan. Furthermore, France has numerous large immigrant communities: Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, English, and German are each spoken by more than 300,000 people inside France, with Arabic alone represented by over one million speakers.

Yet since the establishment of compulsory primary education in the 1880s, French was proclaimed the sole language of instruction in state schools. This policy itself continued a trend dating since shortly after the French Revolution, when it was decided to favor Parisian French over the other languages of France as part of the democratic effort to ensure that all citizens could understand parliamentary debates and government documents. From the early to the mid-twentieth century, policies of punishment and shaming for using languages other than French at school led to a rapid decline in the number of speakers of France's regional languages.

Today, regardless of the language in which they first learned to speak at home, most French children will be immersed in French-based instruction from the first day in a state primary school. Although in recent years there has been less repression of non-French languages in primary schools, there is still little state support for bilingual education programs. Bilingual programs are, however, now legally permitted with regional languages allotted a maximum of 3 hours of instruction per week and up to 50% time in history and geography—as long as the full quota of hours for French instruction is still respected.

Interestingly, the debate over language of instruction in France rarely brings into consideration issues of how to ensure students' understanding and learning achievement. Rather, the issues raised are legal and philosophical, as the French

government, regional organizations, and citizens debate issues of minority language rights versus the unity of the nation and the protection of the French language in the face of international Anglicization.

Here are some of the major events in a chronology of France's public conversation over the language of instruction.

1539: The Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts makes Parisian French the official language for the French government, replacing Latin.

1635: The Académie Française is established to codify the orthography and lexicon of the French language and publish a dictionary.

1789-1799: The French Revolution

1794: Abbé Henri Grégoire presents his Report on the necessity and means to annihilate the patois and to universalize the use of the French language to the National Convention.

1881: The Third Republic establishes free compulsory primary education, mandating French as the language of instruction.

1900-1950: Different laws and regulations punish the usage of regional languages, including anywhere on school grounds. The occupation of France by German troops during World War II leads to a particularly strong backlash against German in the Alsace region schools.

1951: The Loi Deixonne gives four regional languages (Basque, Breton, Catalan, and Occitan) official educational status, permitting one hour of elective instruction per week. No teacher training, materials, or other government support was provided.

1970s: Local organizations in Brittany and in the Catalan- and Basque-speaking regions [initiate bilingual schools](#); regional governments begin to support the idea.

1976: The Haby Committee recommends allowing the teaching of up to 3 hours per week of a regional language. However, the Ministry of Education continues to resist including regional languages as examination subjects.

1982: A Ministry of Education Circular permits the experimental teaching of other subjects (especially geography and history) in the regional languages. Bilingual instruction is not a right, but depends on the "expressed wish" of both teacher and students.

1992: The [European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages](#) is adopted by the Council of Europe, including an article regarding teaching pre-school, primary, and secondary education in the relevant regional or minority languages—though states do not have to adopt all of the articles in order to ratify the Charter. The French Constitution is amended to explicitly name French as the language of the Republic.

1999: Prime Minister Lionel Jospin signs the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but President Jacques Chirac refuses to ratify it. France's highest court rules that the Charter "poses a serious threat to the unity of the French people and the indivisibility of the Republic," in addition to violating the (amended) French Constitution due to the requirement of officially recognizing languages other than French.

2001: A national law approves bilingual education in Alsace, reversing the long-standing resistance against Alsace's Germanic regional language that had been in place since the World Wars.

2003: The [first official curricula in foreign and regional languages for primary school](#) are published.

2006: The French National Assembly rejects a proposed Constitutional amendment calling for the recognition of regional languages.

2010: The [Fédération pour les Langues Régionales dans l'Enseignement Publique](#) reports a total of 53,029 French primary students (approximately 1.3% of all those enrolled) studying in bilingual schools, not all of them public institutions.

2012: 7,000 people march the streets of Bayonne to demonstrate for the recognition of Basque as an official language. President François Hollande proclaims, in a letter to the Association des Régions de France, "I will make sure that the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is ratified."

2013: French members of the European Parliament voted against a resolution on endangered regional languages saying that "it violates the unity of the French Republic." Overall, 92% of EU lawmakers approved the resolution.

2014: Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, a Moroccan-born French citizen is appointed France's Minister of Education. Her appointment meets outrage and attacks from some quarters, including wide circulation of a fraudulent memo written in her name and advising French towns to offer weekly Arabic language classes—signaling continued discomfort with the question of the language rights

of France's immigrant minorities.

2015: The French Senate rejects a bill to amend the Constitution in order to ratify the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, citing danger to French unity. Excluding France, 25 out of 47 member states have ratified the Charter on Minority and Regional Languages and it is now a prerequisite for new EU applicant countries. Even if France eventually ratifies the charter, it is not required to adopt the articles related to providing bilingual education.

2016: French lawmakers reject a proposal to allow immersion in languages other than French in schools.

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