

AROUND THE WORLD IN TWO LANGUAGES

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The ABC's of Official Languages: no author stated

In a world where an estimated 6,500 languages are spoken in some 200 countries, Canada is not alone in having more than one official language. About one in four countries has more than one official or semi-official language. These countries include Switzerland, Belgium, Finland, Malta, and Kenya. Major international organizations, such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Economic Community, all have several official languages.

Having two world-class languages is an important advantage in an era of global competition. Around the world, 33 countries have English and 25 countries have French as one of their official languages.

Throughout the world, 800 million people speak English and 250 million speak French. Both are widely taught as second languages. From an economic point of view, it is easy to see that our two languages give us a head start in opening new markets for Canadian products.

Second languages are taught in schools around the world because they provide personal enrichment and economic opportunities. They also open a window on the world. Not surprisingly, our principal economic competitors, such as Japan and Europe, are increasingly emphasizing languages in their schools.

Many Canadians think it is desirable to speak more than one language. According to award-winning Acadian writer Antonine Maillet:

"Every time you look at the world and life and humanity through the key, which is language, you discover another profile, another vision of the same world... So learning another language makes you bigger, gives you a wider vision, makes you feel subtleties that you don't get in one language... When you hear a French joke or an English joke, it's two different kinds of humour. It's much better to have two jokes than one joke, two ways of laughing."