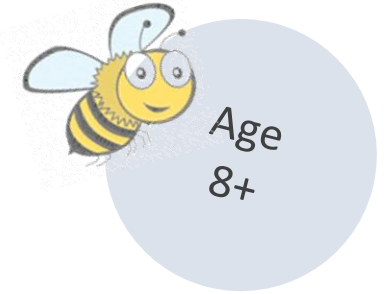


# The clue is in the word!



## Context:

- A primary school in Dublin, Ireland. English is the language of schooling. The Irish language is a curricular subject that is taught in an integrated manner with English. The official Primary School Curriculum allocates 3.5 hours per week for the teaching of the Irish language at this age level.
- There were 26 children in this Third Class aged 8+. 23 of these children spoke home languages other than English. Within this group, there were 8 different language backgrounds. Apart from the word Octopus written on the whiteboard, there were no other prerequisites.

## Reasons for choosing this activity:

- The teacher understood that awareness of language, e.g., the connections and links that exist between languages, does not happen spontaneously. She knew that her pupils' intrinsic knowledge of language, possible connections, similarities, etc. both in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure would have to be activated to raise it to an explicit level (→ language learning is a process).
- In order to do this, she chose a word, central to the topic under discussion, to informally draw children's attention to possible links. The teacher did not know the required word in all the languages of the classroom. The pupils who contributed knew. That was sufficient.

## Description:

- Writing the word Octopus on the whiteboard, the teacher asked the following question: "Can anyone tell me how many legs an octopus has?" There was silence while the pupils reflected (→ active language learning). The teacher then let the children in on a secret saying "I'll give you a hint. There's a clue in the word!" One girl put up her hand and said: "I think an octopus has eight legs". The teacher confirmed that *eight* was correct, praised the child and asked how she had deduced the answer. The pupil explained that the *oct* part of the word reminded her of the word *ocht* which means *eight* in Irish. Again, the teacher affirmed the girl and asked her what the word for eight was in her own language. The girl replied that *opt* was the word in Romanian.
- The teacher then asked if pupils could **share the word for eight in their respective home languages or any other languages they knew** (→ relying on existing linguistic repertoires). Many examples were forthcoming: *huit; ocho, osiem*; etc. All these examples were written on the whiteboard by the teacher as the pupils called out how to spell them (→ relying on existing linguistic repertoires).

## Observation:

- The atmosphere in the class was electrifying. All pupils became fully absorbed and focused during this interaction (→ meaningful language learning). Two pupils who were native speakers of English approached the teacher after the lesson to ask if English, their home language, was a language.
- When awareness of language is heightened, it allows for development of increased learner autonomy as each pupil will bring his/her linguistic repertoire into play (→ active learning). This benefits the pupils who are learning the language of schooling. It also benefits children who speak the language of schooling. Without such interactions, they would not otherwise be exposed to the concept, at this stage in their lives, that a wide variety of words in different languages can be used to describe the same object/idea. In this way, valuing and encouraging use of all languages in the classroom benefits everyone – including the teacher who gets increased insights into how children learn.
- Several weeks later, the teacher was introducing the mathematical topic of decimals. Following her previous procedure, she wrote the word *decimals* on the white board and asked if anyone could guess what it meant. After some thought, an English speaker said that she thought it had something to do with the number ten. She was affirmed for her answer and asked how she had come to this realisation. She said that the first part of the word reminded her of the word *deich* (Irish – pronounced ‘de’) which means ten.

## Comment:

Where children speak the language of schooling and are learning a second language, e.g., Irish, the presence and use of additional languages in the classroom environment can benefit learning in the second language (see use of *ocht* and *deich* above) as awareness of language develops. Where a majority and minority language are used without reference to engagement with additional languages, the minority language is more likely to suffer.



Image: Shutterstock