

All we know about bats ...

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 are 26 children in this Sixth Class. 20 of these children speak home languages other than English. Within this group there are 9 different language backgrounds. An English-Irish and an English-French dictionary are used that allow for word searches in Irish, English and French.
- When the work comes back, a number of children have written down, as one of their facts, that the Irish name for bat is *ialtóg* (→ autonomous learning; relying on existing linguistic repertoires). This, although the lesson is from the nature study point of view.
- **The following day, the teacher explains** that the Irish name the children are using is different to the name she herself has learned as a child. *Sciathán leathair* is the name she has been given for a bat. She explains that it is a very descriptive name as its literal translation means 'leather wing'. She goes on to say that the Irish name, unlike its English equivalent, gives a clue as to the appearance of a bat. The teacher then asks if anybody knows the name for a bat in any other language (→ relying on existing linguistic repertoires). A French child contributes *chauve-souris*. She knows that *souris* means mouse but doesn't not know the meaning of *chauve*. Using the dictionary, the children discover that '*chauve*' means 'bald' (→ active language learning). So, in French, the literal name for a bat is '*bald mouse*'. A Ukrainian child gives the name in Russian *летучая мышь* (*letuchaya mysh*) explaining that this means 'flying mouse'.

Reasons for choosing the activity:

- This activity is an unexpected preamble to a science lesson that has been designed to explore various characteristics of the bat including its physical features.

Description:

- The teacher has given her children an extract to read for homework on the topic of bats. Having read the extract, children are also asked to write five facts about bats. Discussion will take place after the children's initial research/preparation (→ active language learning).

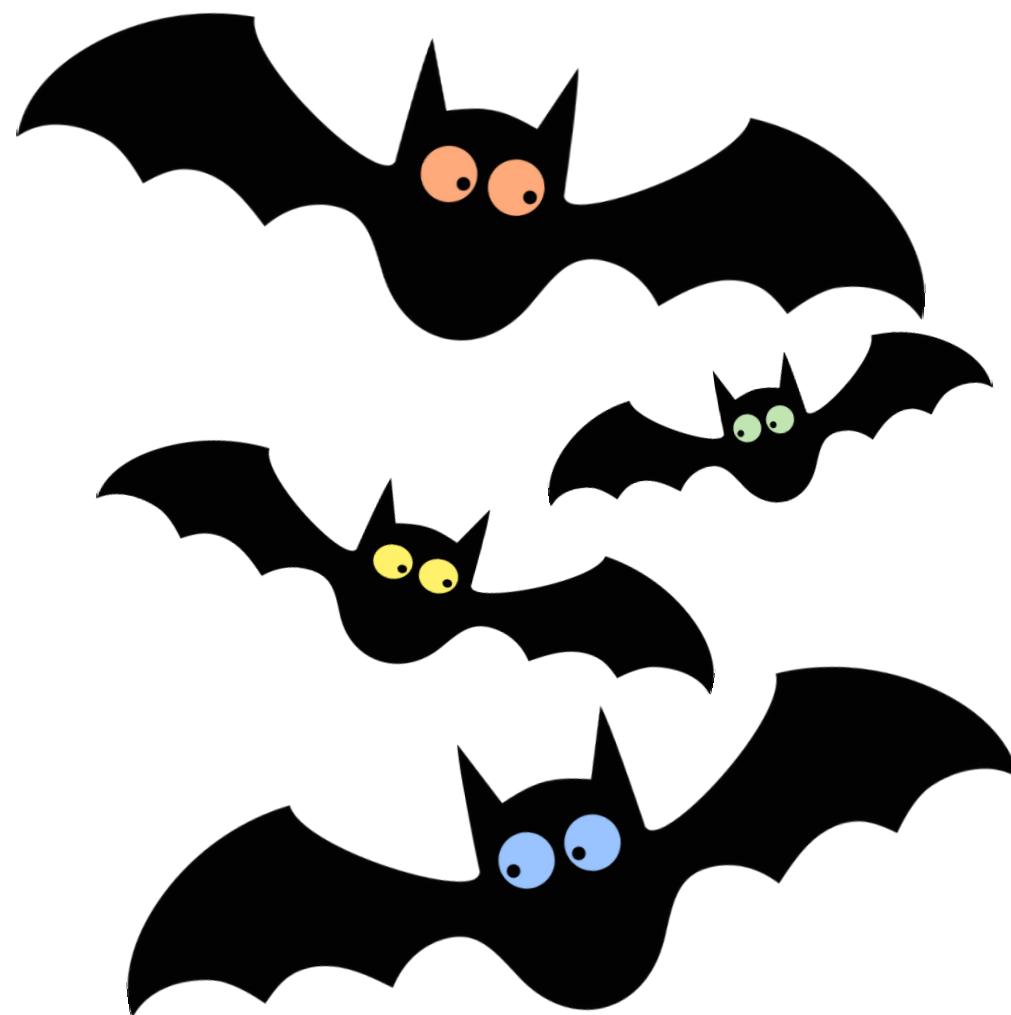
- A further discovery is made when the class reads that most of the bats in Ireland are from the **Vespertilionidae** family. The teacher reminds the children that one of the prayer sessions observed by monks is called *Vespers*. Using the dictionary, the children discover that *Vespers* means ‘evening prayer’. From this they deduce (→ active language learning), that the bat flies in the evening time. This deduction is confirmed when they read the scientific information in the text about bats.

Observation:

- Children gain a very important insight when they realise that merely by sharing their knowledge of the name of the bat in a variety of languages (→ relying on existing knowledge/ linguistic repertoires) they learn that the bat:
 - flies (in the evening time);
 - has leathery wings;
 - looks like a mouse;
 - is bald.

This much has been learned before looking at any of the scientific information.

- By analysing the word *vespertilionidae* and applying their knowledge of history, the children discover another fact about bats. All of this is achieved before the topic is tackled from the point of view of science/biology/nature study (→ holistic language learning).



Images: Pixabay