Nonsense and Grammar

Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Language
Target Language - German

Strand 2 - Language Awareness
Elements - Reflecting on how the target language works.
Learning Outcomes - 2.1 & 2.2

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Nonsense and Grammar

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Using nonsense words to help give an understanding of German grammar.

How it maps to the curriculum

▼ JC German

STRAND: 2. Language Awareness

STRAND UNIT: 1. The Workings of the Target Language

> 💬 SUGGESTIONS FOR USE: Using nonsense words initially invite pupils to categorise in their own way. Ask them to deduce patterns in their categories. After understanding the concept of grammatical construction they can then move on to similar activities in German.

STRAND: 2. Language Awareness

STRAND UNIT: 2. Comparing Language with Other Languages

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Grammatical concepts are sometimes difficult to explain satisfactorily to pupils.

Practical experience also shows that direct teaching of concepts is impossible and fruitless. A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty verbalism, a parrot-like repetition of words by the child, simulating knowledge of the corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum. (Vygotsky – Thought and Language 1962)

However, using nonsense words can sometimes be a way of helping pupils to understand grammatical concepts without a lengthy explanation. The aim is to get the pupils to play with and use the nonsense words in a variety of contexts before asking them to see connections and links. Only after they have played with the nonsense words and discovered patterns do you introduce them to similar concepts in German.

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To begin with provide your pupils with the following group of nonsense words. As a starter activity, invite them to categorise the words in as many different combinations as they can within five minutes:

bleeb	splim	meepily	krut	yoll	squirzy
grum	flenk	snidge	treb	zenk	numdle
jimble	corm	flut	modge	gandle	skrudge
stum	herry	tronn	quonky	hunj	himpily

They could then categorise them:
- Alphabetically
- Words beginning with fl / tr
- Words ending in – ble / -eb
- Five letter words

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Nonsense words help pupils appreciate patterns, sounds, links, suffixes and prefixes, (grammatical concepts) before confronting real words in German.

When they have completed this first categorisation, ask the pupils to re-categorise them according to these patterns that you have invented for the words:

squirzy	bleeb	numdle	humpily
Adjective	**Noun**	**Infinitive**	**Adverb**

Can they group other words underneath?

What deductions do the pupils make from this exercise?

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For example they may deduce:
- ➔ words ending in –y are adjectives
- ➔ words ending in –ily are adverbs
- ➔ words ending in –le are infinitives
  And so on

Test this hypothesis with a range of nonsense words until it breaks down
(the exception tests the rule).

If the pupils have grasped the concept of the grammatical construction, then try out the same exercise with a text in German. What patterns do the pupils notice (if any)? When they have grasped the **FORM** of the word, they may well be ready to move on to the meaning and communicative possibilities. This is a session well suited to a plenary.

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Access the activity sheets here.

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