

# Communication beyond language

**John Heywood** reflects on facilitating action learning sets with three francophone African groups

**A**ction learning is a process for working on real and complex challenges using the knowledge and skills of a small group.

Through skilful questioning and the qualities of listening, reflection and feedback, group members are encouraged to re-interpret and rethink entrenched ideas and assumptions. The process is based on the pioneering work of Reg Revans – Cambridge scientist and management consultant.

Revans' equation  $L = P + Q$  demonstrates that  $L$  (learning) is the sum of  $P$  (programmed knowledge – what we know or *think* we know from sources such as books, teachers, colleagues, the internet etc) plus  $Q$  (questioning insight – asking insightful questions to test and explore our thinking, understanding and assumptions).

Action learning offers participants a safe environment in which to explore new ways of thinking and acting. In an action learning group (or set) there are usually three roles: the presenter or issue holder, the set members and the facilitator.

## Context

My company, Action Learning Associates, works closely with a multinational organisation based in Amsterdam, where we deliver action learning facilitator training as part of a long-term strategic programme to develop first-line managers.

While the organisation's official operating language is English, there is demand for action learning facilitator training in French. At the time of writing, I have delivered the training three times to French-speaking groups: two groups from the Democratic Republic of Congo and one mixed group with participants from Congo-Brazzaville, Algeria and Tunisia.



## When I need to intervene as facilitator, I have to use more straightforward language than I might in English

For participants in these groups, French is the lingua franca and not necessarily their first language. In Kinshasa, for example, Kinshasa Lingala has evolved – a way of conversing that borrows from several languages. Passing from one language to another is common. You can start a conversation in Lingala and switch to French or another language without warning.

According to Wikipedia, the DRC has more than 200 indigenous languages and five lingua francas – French, Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba – with French being the official language of government and business.

With regard to the programme, all training materials are professionally translated into French. I have translated my own input – presentations, explanations and examples of practice – and verified the

translations with a native French speaker.

So far, most of the participants have understood English to varying degrees but they are more comfortable speaking in French. At times I have been able to explain certain points in English.

### The challenges of working in a second language

Though I continue to study French, I am not

perfectly fluent in the language – I have never lived in a French-speaking country and I do not use the language on a daily basis. So, I have limits. In addition, working in French in the African context means that I am working with others whose mother tongue is not French. The potential for misunderstandings is therefore greater.

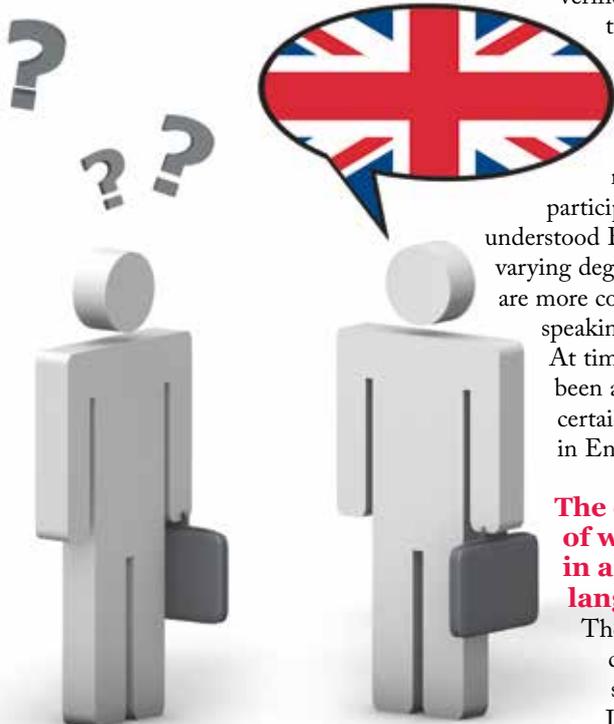
Furthermore, other than improving my vocabulary and general comprehension, I cannot fully prepare for an individual's unique presentation (presenters or issue holders give an informal 'presentation' of their situation: this is actively listened to, without interruption, advice or judgment, by the other members of the group and by the facilitator). One participant described action learning as "un exercice à la fois simple et complexe". What he meant was that, while action learning itself (ie the process, the steps you go through, what you do) is simple, how you think, feel and behave in response can be hard to articulate and make sense of regardless of the language in use.

### The benefits of working in a second language

When I need to intervene as facilitator (eg to highlight a learning point, to explain a specific idea or to remind the group of the process), I have to use more straightforward language than I might in English. In thinking through how to explain points, I must go through the mental process of stripping down explanations to essentials - no frills - and this has helped me examine my own understanding at a deeper level. Feedback from participants includes "...the simplicity of terms used by the facilitator..." as a factor that helped them to achieve their personal objectives for the training programme.

Paradoxically, when working in a second language, there is increased potential to make interactions in the group clearer. I have greater licence to check meanings, ask the 'naïve' questions and verify anything I do not understand. On the one hand, there is, of course, potential to divert the speaker's train of thought if this checking is overdone. On the other hand, the verification of sense and meaning offers the speaker the chance to further examine his own thoughts in order to construct an authentic narrative that he can refer back to.

In checking my understanding in the French-speaking groups, I am modelling 'not-knowing'. Prevailing cultural norms can make it difficult to admit that you do not know the answer to a problem or that you are having difficulties. Being open about 'not-knowing' and making



it an acceptable, even preferable, starting point for problem-solving has positive effects on performance and motivation both within the action learning set and back at work.

It is worth noting that in studies relating to the Johari window (the well-known model that helps people understand their relationships with self and others), top performing groups, departments, companies and organisations always tend to have a culture of open, positive communication. Encouraging the positive development of the 'arena' for everyone (ie being appropriately open) is a fundamental aspect of effective performance. The effect of modelling and facilitating greater openness, in terms of feeling comfortable saying 'I don't understand this or that...' or 'I'm struggling, can you help me understand more clearly...', is reflected in results from the programme's pilot study and in subsequent participants' reflective learning logs (translated by me where necessary). For example:

- "...asking open, insightful questions, listening, making action points and reflecting are now my basic methods when approaching work challenges"
- "[my action plan includes] increasing my contact with colleagues with the goal of bringing us together more and creating a spirit of openness in discussions"
- "[AL] is an excellent opportunity for the participants to mingle and share their issues and concerns. They are able to open up..."
- "[working in AL sets helps us see that] we are not working alone, we are in the same boat".

### Language and culture

How do cultural differences affect understanding or not understanding? Within two DRC groups, participants are from all parts of this vast country (it covers an area larger than Spain, France, Germany, Sweden and Norway combined). They have different first languages and different ethnic backgrounds. What brings them together is a shared second language (French) and a common organisational culture.

From my outsider's perspective, the organisational culture is more apparent than their ethnic identities. There is a common understanding of company words and phrases, a sense of loyalty and a good understanding and awareness of global strategic initiatives and organisational methodologies. The organisational culture is part of Revans' *P* or programmed knowledge.

As the three-day facilitator training programme progresses, the group develops a sense of trust and, with that, its abilities to challenge and

## *In checking my understanding in the French-speaking groups, I am modelling 'not-knowing'*

support deep-rooted values and beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, assumptions made and actions taken. Individuals' ways of operating begin to be explored, understood and perhaps modified as a result. A strong group culture develops and, for the time in the set at least, this becomes stronger and more evident than other social, cultural or linguistic identities.

Working together as an AL set creates the space for people to establish common bonds and a common group culture. This seems to happen regardless of language, or social or cultural identity (based on work with ten international groups over a period of three years). Where behaviour was justified by set members in terms of their cultural norms (ie 'it's okay for people to do that here'), I chose to explore this further. For example, in one group, occasional body language (including effusive yawning and stretching) did not fit with my own idea of active listening but I needed to find out whether my reading of the situation was shared. My asking the presenter to describe the effect of such body language displayed by one of the set members produced the responses 'I did not feel he was interested in what I was saying...' and 'he wasn't listening...'.  
→

This direct feedback from the presenter prompted a discussion about cultural norms and the degree to which these should be respected or modified in the action learning setting. In this case, the presenter's feedback was accepted with good humour and behaviour changed.

Tapping into local traditional practices of small group problem-solving (this was referred to as 'sous l'arbre' or 'le Mbongui' in DRC and Congo Brazzaville) has offered some individuals a cultural touchstone and a way to accept, understand and 'own' the potential and value of action learning. The following description of Le Mbongui is provided by former programme participant Mme Anita Kajemba (and translated by me).

"Le Mbongui is a common traditional practice in black Africa. In almost every village, there is always a tree in whose shade representatives of

## Working together as an AL set creates the space for people to establish common bonds and a common group culture

the community come together to discuss and seek solutions to community issues, solve problems between individuals or just spend time together drinking beer and playing 'mankala'. Cohesion and good interpersonal relationships are necessary for the wellbeing, if not the survival, of the cultural group. The problem, whatever it is, is put to the group. Everyone contributes and, depending on the complexity of the problem, discussion can last a long time, even days. All ideas are welcome and are discussed, even the most contradictory ideas. In the group there is respect and reverence for all, even when ideas are opposed. The clan chief plays the role of arbiter and ensures that people do not hog the space. Once everyone has spoken and all points of view discussed, we move to the stage of decision-making. Again, the different proposals are discussed, their consequences analysed and, finally, the best proposals are retained and become decisions involving the whole community. Even those who were not in favour of the decisions made must also comply with them and make them their own. This method applies to all kinds of problems that can face the community as a whole or to the families or individuals within the community."

The above description, particularly in terms of expected behaviours within the group, shows clear links to the principles and practice of action learning.

### What is the experience of the French-speaking participants in the training programme?

Positive verbal feedback and written evaluations have rated the programme very highly and are consistent with evaluations of groups working in English:

- "un programme très bien structure"
- "...c'est magnifique"
- "bravo, et merci!"
- "parfait"
- "I feel I [am] growing"
- "...très bonne approche de présentation de la théorie"

- "bonne répartitions du groupe"
- "captivant"
- "rigoureux"
- "je suis marquée par... l'impact sur moi-même..."
- "...richesse de la documentation"
- "[action learning]... brings you closer to others".

From my perspective, the level of attention and engagement and the development of participants' facilitation skills have been consistent with other groups following the same programme in English, suggesting that, while spoken communication is undoubtedly important, it's not language alone that gets the message across and 'creates the space' for problem-solving at a deep and authentic level.

### Conclusions

When working with any groups, but particularly groups from different cultures – with different social backgrounds and educations, working in different functions, with different mother tongues and different levels of knowledge about AL and its principles – we need to use as many ways as possible to communicate. In addition to verbal communication, these might include the modelling of effective and appropriate skills and behaviours; offering high quality and relevant reading materials; giving well-prepared and focused presentations with clear and relevant examples; including participative and trust-building exercises; showing video; giving 'live' demonstrations; intervening to explore 'cultural' differences, and being respectful of existing cultural practices that may be highly relevant and even enriching for AL (eg 'sitting under the tree').

As AL reaches other languages and social groups in the wider global community, it is worth considering how traditional practices and thinking might feed back into its theory and practice so that a dialogue is established between practices rather than a one-way discourse.

AL is as much about 'being' as it is about 'doing'. So, I would argue that, while it is essential to understand the process and principles of AL and to be able to communicate them clearly, it is equally important to put all these considerations, and yourself, to one side so that you can be fully in the present and in the service of the presenter, regardless of social, cultural or linguistic context. In doing this, we can fully tune in to what's happening here and now, in this group, and work with the reality – Revans' *Q* – rather than trying to work with what we think we know – Revans' *P*. **TJ**

This article is available in a French translation. Please contact john.heywood@actionlearningassociates.co.uk for a copy

### John Heywood

is an associate of Action Learning Associates. He can be contacted at john.heywood@actionlearningassociates.co.uk