

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by *L.S. Harms*

Intercultural communication has, in recent years, become a matter of worldwide concern. This article attempts to examine the pathway from language learning to intercultural communication, sketch a communication model, provide a working definition, outline some unexpected benefits, and establish a long-range goal for human communication.

Language Learning

When a student starts out to learn a second language, he starts a journey down a long path that can, if all goes well, lead to a world network for the intercultural interchange of ideas. To be sure, the beginning student often undertakes to learn a second language to complete a school requirement and laments the hours he must spend in class, lab and homework.

L. S. Harms, Ph.D., Professor of Communication at the University of Hawaii and author of numerous books and publications, is chairman of PEACEAT.

Dr. Harms, international lecturer and consultant is also organizer and chairman of the SCA Communication Rights Commission.

Curiously, even though that student may complete a course of second language study with distinction, he often makes little or no use of his newly developed skill. His investment does not pay off.

Language learning has, to a considerable extent, been domesticated. Second languages can be learned in classrooms and laboratories. Intercultural communication, however, occurs for the most part

in airports, on the streets and in the shops of world cities, in outdoor cafes, and a thousand and one other places where persons from different cultural backgrounds communicate to achieve a mutual purpose. Intercultural communication extends far beyond the classroom.

As I see it, intercultural communication, is beset with surprises of many kinds. Its outcomes are difficult to predict. And it seems destined to remain an uncertain but important adventure. For instance, intercultural communication usually requires that rules be discovered or invented while two persons are acutally engaged in communication. Risk and uncertainty are key concepts.

Basic Model

Intercultural communication then, is characterized by greater variety and diversity and uncertainty than most intracultural communication. For that reason, it is important to be quite explicit about some of the assumptions that underlie intercultural communication.

Figure 1 shows a basic communication model (1,2,7,8). That model indicates that in the simplest case of intercultural communication there are two communicators, one a first language speaker (Communicator A) and the other a second language speaker (Communicator B). Intercultural communication is of necessity a two-way process. Notice that the language-related terms of speaker-listener or source-receiver are deliberately not used; these terms are appropriate only for a one-way model of communication. Quite importantly, there is also an external observer (Observer O). The observer can be an instructor or a student; that viewpoint is

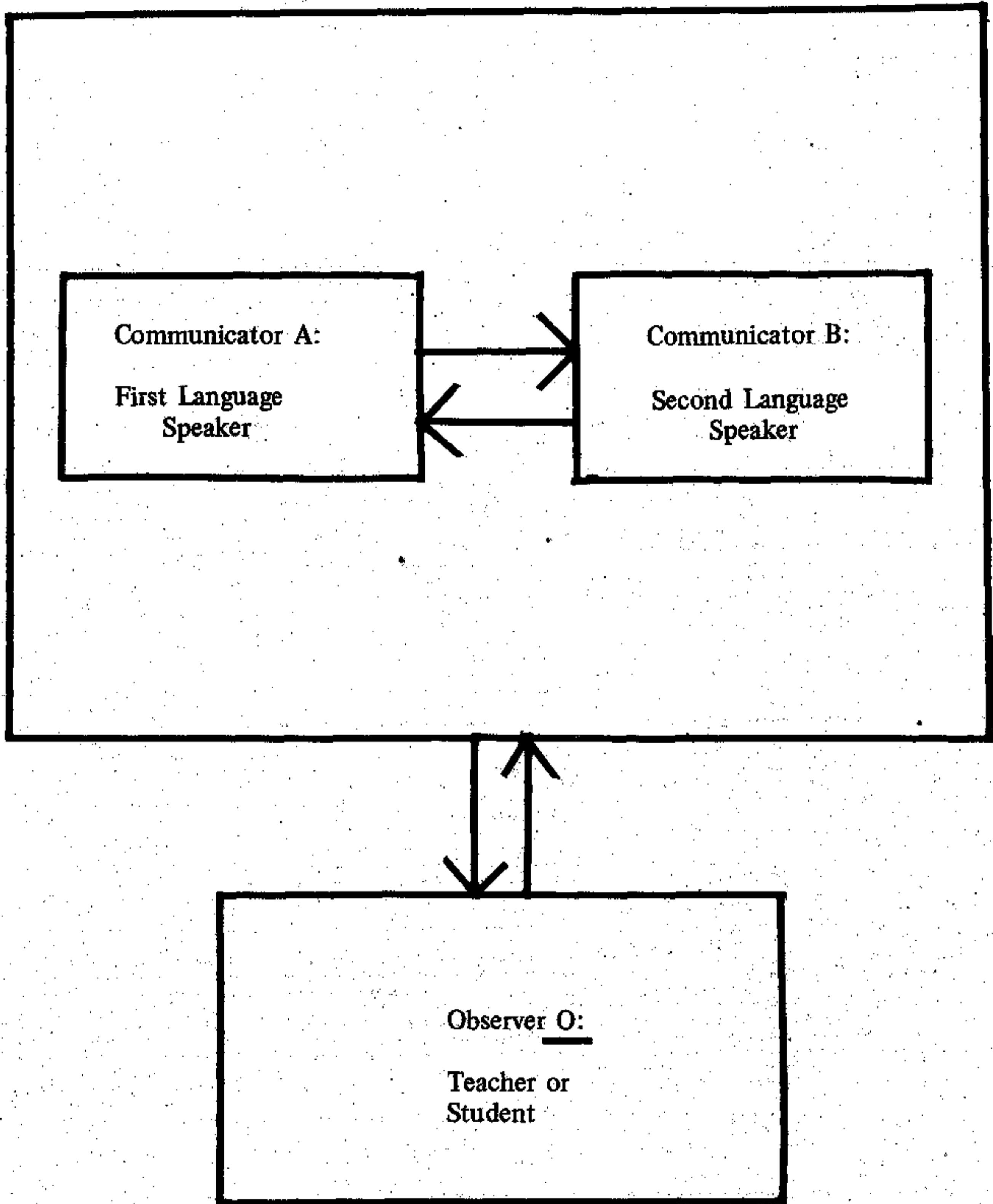


Figure 1: Dyadic Model for Intercultural Communication

necessary to observe the details of intercultural interaction between Communicator A and Communicator B. From that viewpoint, for instance, the question

immediately arises: What can and should A do to help B? Additional pedagogical uses of the observer role are discussed in detail elsewhere (1:137) *(continued)*

Definition

The proposed definition of intercultural communication follows from the model shown in Figure 1. Thus, intercultural communication occurs when any two (or small group of) communicators of dissimilar language and cultural backgrounds communicate with each other to achieve some mutual purpose. It can be observed, for instance, in a telephone call, in face-to-face dialog, or in a committee meeting. Note that definitions that employ terms such as source and receiver usually suggest that the source manipulates the receiver in some way—which leads on to cultural imperialism. The proposed definition, on the other hand, leads to mutual influence, interchange, and reciprocal interaction.

Benefits

Until recently, the focus in intercultural communication was on errors, mistakes, barriers, breakdowns and a long list of other negatives. As we began to apply a system or cybernetic model to intercultural communication, two advantages of enormous importance became apparent. The names for these two advantages are synergy and serendipity.

Synergy results in a system when the achievement of that system exceeds what can be predicted from the performance of the individual parts. Thus, in a communication system with two culturally dissimilar communicators, one often finds that they are able to solve problems, reach insights, generate ideas, and arrive at decisions that remain 'unthought of' within the framework of a single culture. Intercultural communication then, can, when the conditions are right, greatly enhance human capacities to cope with a wide range of questions.

Serendipity results from what we usually call errors, mistakes, deviations and the like. While synergy can be expected from a rather serious application of human communication skills, serendipity requires a light-hearted, child-like curiosity about the shape of new and unexpected things. More generally, serendipity is the art and

science of looking for one thing and finding something else which is different and better. Intercultural communication provides both a place to look and a way of looking that exceeds at times the individual human imagination.

Taken together, *synergy* and *serendipity*—or if you like, *synser*—provide an important perspective on intercultural communication. That perspective arises from the system model in Figure 1, and the proposed definition. Obviously, language learning undertaken with a goal of *synser* intercultural communication takes on a very different academic cloak.

Right to Communicate

There are nearly four billion persons in the world and many, perhaps most, of them are constrained to communicate within the narrow framework of a single dialect. We have long held that human growth and development were closely linked to communication and language skills. Until now, the problem has been difficult even to think about because it is so large (3).

Recently there has come out of multi-cultural dialog—with a bit of synergy and serendipity to be sure—a new and simple concept: **Everyone has the Right to Communicate.** That concept requires that we examine closely human communication *needs*, deal with the fact that we can now *invent* any communication *technology* required to serve human communication *needs*, and shape the communication *policy* necessary to ensure that technology serves those needs (4,5). These are new conditions in the world. Both professionals and students of language and intercultural communication have a special contribution to make for they have the skills and outlook to advance this Right.

As a long-range goal, then, let us declare that everyone shall come to have the Right to Communicate.

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