**The Interaction of Cultures**

1. **Cultures vs. Subcultures**

Differences exist within any society; they can be noticed in various factors (e.g. religion, food, art, educational level…) that interact to shape the culture of a particular society. Based on these differences, cultures are viewed as either ‘homogenous’ or ‘heterogeneous’. The former refers to a culture “in which the majority of members share the same beliefs, attitudes and values and have little difference in economic wealth and social level” (Merrouche, 2006 p. 49); while the latter refers to a culture “in which members of the society come from diverse cultural groups […] there are differences of economic, educational, and social levels among the groups who live in the same society” (Merrouche, 2006 p. 49).

However, a close examination of cultures would reveal that every culture is heterogeneous; it is a continuum of patterns of behaviours, values, and beliefs, and it consists of a variety of subcultures. A subculture, like a culture, represents a relatively large number of individuals. However, different subcultures exist within dominant cultures; they can be distinguished based on economic or social class, ethnicity, race, or geographic region. Some scholars advocated the use of the term “co-culture” instead of “sub-culture” because the former implies mutuality while the latter implies inferiority and subordination.

Individuals belong to different cultures, they simultaneously belong to particular subcultures, but they may further belong to subgroups. The latter gather people on the basis of some factors such as age (e.g. teenagers), sex (e.g. females), occupation (e.g. teachers, doctors, students…), religious affiliation…. Members of the group share common interests and characteristics; they share language (words) and ideas, as they share norms and values. Henceforth, the communication problems that may occur between interlocutors belonging to different cultures, may occur also in case individuals belong to different subcultures and subgroups. Many conflicts between parents and children result from incompatibilities between the system of norms and values that operate at home (with parents) and the one operating outside (with friends) (Merrouche, 2006).

1. **Dominant vs. Minority Cultures**

The diversity of cultures and subcultures results in both difference and variety, however, the norms and the standards are established according to the beliefs and the norms of the majority. In other words, dominant cultural patterns are those that represent the majority. Thus, in any community, there is a dominant culture (and language) and a minority culture (and language). Kramsch (1998: 9) believed that the culture of a group is that of the powerful: “only the powerful decide whose values and beliefs will be deemed worth adopting by the group, which historical events are worth commemorating, which future is worth imagining. Cultures and especially national cultures resonate with the voices of the powerful, and are filled with the silences of the powerless''.

Theoretically speaking, cultures are equal (as languages); there is no reason to believe that one race or culture is better than the other. However, this equality is not reflected in reality. Some cultures are ‘dominant’ and ‘superior’ while others are ‘subordinate’ and ‘inferior’. Barrow (1990:8-9) claimed that “some cultures are superior to others, at least in certain specific respects [which include] their literature, their morality, their industrial capacity, their agricultural efficiency, their scientific understanding and so forth” .

In other words, belonging to a different culture does not mean being ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’. Rather, cultural differences should be respected and tolerated; they bring richness and quality to the human cultural heritage. Education that follows a *realistic attitude* is one way to overcome existing prejudices and stereotypes; it is important not to idealise or undervalue other cultures, but instead to enable learners make comparisons to discover the other cultures and to understand their own at the same time. Education should aim at establishing intercultural societies. An intercultural society is a society which recognizes the importance of common norms and languages but also recognizes the specificities of minorities, and in which diversity is perceived as a mutual source of enrichment. In other words, an intercultural society is the one that is founded on the recognition of and openness to cultural differences, as well as flexibility and acceptance of change (Merrouche, 2006).

1. **Cultural Globalization or Cultural Imperialism**

Nowadays, the world is witnessing unceasing people’ s movements, namely movements of businessmen, sportsmen, refugees, immigrants, students, diplomats, members of international organizations, tourists and others. Moreover, modern means of communication have facilitated the interaction of people, and hence of languages and cultures. Because cultures are in constant interaction, they overlap and borrow from each other. People do not remain within the frontiers of their native culture; they venture beyond. This may be reflected in the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the music they listen to, and sometimes even in their ways of thinking and behaving.

Tomlinson (1997: 170 -171) defined globalization as:

the rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, in situations and individuals worldwide. It is a process which involves a compression of time and space (Harvey,1989), shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in the time taken – either physically or representationally – to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing human beings ‘closer’ to one another.

Some believe that the globalization process goes back to the 15th century, when Europeans began to colonize the world; others think it to belong to the second part of the twentieth century. Some view it as a 'done deal', whereas for others it is a 'work in progress'.

The interaction of cultures may be viewed as a positive process, in that it brings about variety which in turn leads to enrichment and expansion: ''Cultures enrich one another – this keeps them alive and protects them from museum – like paralysis” (Naumann, 2000 cited in Merrouche, 2006 p.56). These days culture is not associated with a community of people living in the same geographical area and sharing a common historical origin; focus is now on a common culture that connects people on social, professional, artistic, economic, and technological bases. Nowadays, we talk about youth culture, internet users’ culture, artists' culture …, each of which may be seen as a ‘global’ culture.

However, the interaction of world cultures carries an inherent risk of intercultural and ethnic conflict; people identify strongly with their native culture which confers on them their identity: they are nobody, unless they belong to a culture. Crucial issues such as cultural identity and nationalism are brought to the fore in a period of rapid social change. In an attempt to preserve one’s culture, one's language, one’s religion, one’s history, one’s ethnic belongingness, people get involved in conflicts. The image conveyed by the media worsened the situation.

Moreover, the intensive interaction of world cultures may lead them to melt in the same mould imposed by one culture; one or more culture(s) may attempt to dominate the other cultures . Instances of wearing ‘ Jeans’ and eating ‘Big Macs’ almost all over the world lead us to say that this major culture i s likely to be the Western American culture. Cultural imperialism as defined by O’Sullivan et al. (op .cit: 73) is

both an integral part and product of a more general process of imperialism , whereby certain economically dominant nations systematically develop and extend their economic , political and cultural control over other countries […] The local cultures of developing nations become dominated and in varying degrees invaded, displaced and challenged by foreign, often western, cultures

In other words, cultural imperialism occurs when the native culture and its language are presented and deemed as ‘backward’ and ‘incapable of modernity’.

Foreign language teaching can as well be a powerful way to promote imperialistic forces, in that it may be a vehicle for the introduction of alien and harmful ideas. Educators who are against the integration of the foreign culture in the Foreign language curriculum argue that such integration would foster cultural imperialism, threatening one’s national cultural identity. They believe that ‘cultural globalization’ is but an extension or a deepening of the cultural imperialism of the West , an ‘Americanization’ or a 'Westernization' . On this basis , if the dominant others (meaning north American , western European, possibly Australian cultures ) are being ‘ imposed ’ locally in terms of clothes , food, music , television programmes, architecture , … , why reinforcing them further through foreign language teaching ?

On the other hand, it is argued that there is no such ‘Americanization’ or cultural imperialism, if people look beyond what seems evident. In relation to USA television exports, it is proved that, though they are dominant especially in third world countries, there is actually high competition in this domain on the part of other international and national companies. There is, thus, a 'pluralization' in the cultural production, and not one–culture dominance. The cultural imperialism perspective is due to the long history of western colonialism and imperialism in the third world. Besides, this perspective overlooks the fact that in the process of the interaction of cultures, there is a mutual influence and not ''a unidirectional flow of power'' (Tomlinson, 1997 p.181) on the part of a ‘strong’ culture over a ‘weaker’ one. Although cultures may lose some of their particularities in the globalization process, it should not be forgotten that the diversity emanating from world cultures leads to the enrichment of the human cultural heritage. One only needs to pick up what is in conformity with one’s religion and morality.

To put it in a nutshell, there are two opposing views when considering the interaction of cultures: some professionals speak of “a clash of civilizations”; they believe that ''cultures are divided by fundamental differences''. Others go for “a dialogue of cultures”; they believe that cultures are ''united by the opportunity and need for dialogue'' , a dialogue which assumes the equality of its parties and where the focus should be on the similarities rather than the differences. That dialogue is always needed to promote attitudes of tolerance, acceptance and respect, and to decrease tensions and hostilities.

Although the expansion of communication technologies was predicted to turn the world into a “global village”, they allow for a huge amount of cultural knowledge about the other without action to adapt oneself with it; i.e., we may interact with people from a different culture without getting access to their deep culture, and this creates misunderstanding. Consequently, globalization does not abolish culture differences as predicted, and such intercultural experiences can not threaten or change the way people perceive their reality. This fact rather leads to an increase in intercultural conflicts.

In this regard, the United Nations Educational Scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO) has proclaimed 2001 the year of dialogue between cultures, a dialogue to be promoted through international seminars, conferences, scholarships and exchange programmes (ERASMUS is an example that can be used to illustrate such a kind of programmes). A global culture is indeed, likely to be shaped in western terms. This does not mean that they are unchallengeable. The role of the other parties particularly people in oriental cultures is to critically analyze concepts and behaviours, to adapt and not adopt them, but above all, to defend their own position. Thus, a global culture will be a common framework to manifest differences , aiming at a better understanding and recognition of ‘others’ and a better communication with them.

1. **The English Language and Culture**

Some professionals argued for the possibility of having a version of English which is ‘Neutral’ or ‘culturally unmarked’, in other words, a version of English that “would serve as a universal medium of communication” (Saleemi, 1985 cited in Merrouche, 2006 p. 72). They claimed that when a language becomes international, it no longer belongs exclusively to its native speakers or any other culture. Instead, English is regarded as a vehicle that is used globally, and it belongs to whoever uses it. Since the English language has been recognized to be an international language, it has been emptied of its political and cultural connotations and specificities; it rather belongs to no particular culture.

However, can a language ever become a culturally neutral medium of communication?

Language and its associated culture are deeply interrelated and interlinked; the cultural norms and conventions of a society are deeply ingrained in its language that one can hardly imagine how they can be extracted from it. Furthermore, scholars (e.g. Widdowson) explained that a language that is emptied of its cultural connotations is deprived from its potential of creativity and change and cannot function as a natural language. Hence, any attempt to ‘simplify’ or to ‘generalize’ or to ‘standardize’ the English language remains a theoretical enterprise that would lead to an artificial product. Speaking English all over the world resulted in other spoken varieties of English or so-called world Englishes but not neutral English.