Section Two: Cultural Awareness

1.1. Definition of Culture

Culture is a nebulous concept that has been a focal point of attention in contemporary thought. Apparently, its complex nature has lead not just to cross-disciplinary, but also to disciplinary tensions between different researchers and scholars (Allan, 1998; Barnouw, 1973; Brown, 1963) who thought long and hard so as to define it and to limit its horizons. For this reason, it is no wonder that a plethora of definitions pertaining to a multiplicity of disciplines have been provided for the term culture, each of which deals with it from a particular angle. In fact, the study of culture is the subject matter of certain research disciplines like anthropology, ethnography, cultural studies and it has been even an attention-grabbing issue for sociologists.

To see more clearly into the concept, it is paramount to indicate that culture suggests a central equation which demonstrates the correlation between the existence of different nations and the availability of different frames for operating .Interestingly, the basic idea of culture "is ancient and can be found in the Bible, Homer, Hippocrates, Herodotus, and Chinese scholars of the Han dynasty" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, as cited in Baldwin et al., 2008, p. ix). Yet, it is still a hotly debated issue and the source of divergent perceptions which are as old as the 1870s. Anthropologist Tylor(1871, p. 1), for instance, in his groundbreaking book *Primitive Culture* asserts that "culture, or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"(as cited in Baldwin et al, p.219). This line of thought leads to the conception that culture is not a unitary, but a pluralistic concept which is made up of a number of components like habits, morals, knowledge and so forth whose acquisition is compulsory for a person to be accepted as one of

the members of a determined community. In a similar vein, Thompson (1990, p. 129) believes that "the culture of a group or society is the array of beliefs, customs, ideas and values, as well as the material artifacts, objects and instruments, which are acquired by individuals as members of the group or society"(as cited in Baldwin et al, p. 216).

For Kroeber and Kluckholn (1952, p. 181), however, culture is best seen as "patterns of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinct achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts" (as cited in Juang & Matsumoto p. 9-10). Kroeber and Kluckholn's definition of culture serves as a timely reminder of the necessity of bringing to the fore the well- known distinction between big C and small c or little c culture. Big C culture is taken to mirror the achievements of a given society with reference to "architecture, geography, classic literature, presidents or political figures, and classical music" (Peterson, 2004, p. 25).

That is, when highlighting the different literary masterpieces of 'Margaret Mitchell', one must be referring to America's big C culture. Small c culture, on the other hand, reflects a society's "core values, attitudes or beliefs, society's norms, legal foundations, assumptions, history, and cognitive processes" (Peterson, 2004, p. 25). This suggests that discussing the core values that govern the British society in a class of teaching English as a foreign language mirrors bringing its small c culture to light. Geertz (1973) is another anthropologist who provides a definition for culture. In his lens, it refers to "shared symbol systems transcending individuals" (as cited in Peterson, 2004, p. 10).

Obviously, these two definitions share one attribute: the assumption that culture is subject to symbolic encoding. Perhaps these symbols or codes, which are characteristic of each society in isolation of the other, are what harden the process of acquiring the target culture on the part of L2 learners. Other definitions are as simple as the one that was provided

by Berry et al (1992) to denote culture just as the "shared way of life of a group of people" (as cited in Peterson, 2004, P. 10) or the one which is furnished by Barnouw (1973, p. 6) who believes that it would be accepted by most anthropologists. Hence, he succinctly asserts that "here is a definition I think most anthropologists would accept: A culture is a way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all the more or less stereotyped patterns which are handed from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation" (as cited in Baldwin et al., 2006, p. 146). Implied in Barnouw's definition is the belief that the patterns that make up a given society do possess the hallmark of being inherited from one generation to another.

Above all, it must be argued that "there are no uncultured societies or individuals. Every society has a culture…and every human being is cultured" (Ralph Linton, 1945, as cited in Baldwin et al., 2006, p. 59). When taking all these controversies into account, it becomes necessary to pen that up to the present moment, it is no wonder that no unanimous agreement as to defining culture has been reached owing to the fact that the existing definitions are as numerous as the existing disciplines themselves.

The definitions provided by different researchers for the term culture, encompassing the above-mentioned ones, are said to fall into one of the following themes:

- Structure/pattern*:* Definitions that look at culture in terms of a system or framework of elements (e.g., ideas, behavior, symbols, or any combination of these or other elements).
- Function: Definitions that see culture as a tool for achieving some end.
- Process*:* Definitions that focus on the ongoing social construction of culture.

- Product*:* Definitions of culture in terms of artifacts (with or without deliberate symbolic intent).
- Refinement: Definitions that frame culture as a sense of individual or group cultivation to higher intellect or morality.
- Power or ideology*:* Definitions that focus on group-based power (including postmodern and postcolonial definitions).
- Group-membership: Definitions that speak of culture in terms of a place or group of people, or that focus on belonging to such a place or group.(as cited in Baldwin et al., 2006, p. 31).

All things considered, culture is indeed a vague concept that has been hotly debated by different researchers in different disciplines. What emphasizes the vagueness of the term is the existence of stark disagreements between scholars whose fields of study are identical. Seemingly, the myriad of definitions that exist tend to cast light on various components of culture. But the fact remains that regardless of what aspects are stressed, foreign language learners need to be introduced to the importance of promoting their cultural understanding in order to bring their language learning process into fruition. With this end in view, the integration of culture in foreign language teaching is a basic prerequisite.

1.2. The Importance of Culture Integration in Foreign Language Teaching

The complexities of culture as a concept coupled with the different ways of defining it have made of it a controversial issue, particularly when its nexus with language is brought to the fore. In fact, integrating culture in foreign language teaching has become an intriguing concern for practitioners, educationalists, and researchers whose views towards this knotty

issue have one thread in common: language and culture are part and parcel of each other and they are by no means mutually exclusive. Thus, nowadays, it is universally accepted that teaching a foreign language necessitates teaching its culture in parallel.

As a matter of fact, neglecting the unavoidable link between culture and language is the main feature that characterizes foreign language teaching under the banner of many teaching approaches and methods. The communicative approach is, incontestably, an enlightening instance of that. Central to it is the concept of communicative competence. The latter focuses on acquiring some competencies like grammatical and discourse competence while completely neglecting the cultural one and the different cultural aspects of language.

Obviously, despite the conjunction of these acquired abilities and others, many foreign language learners failed to run conversations when faced with the necessity of conversing with the natives of the foreign language in question. As an inevitable result of this, intercultural communicative competence, in the last decade, has come to monopolize the discussions in the realm of foreign language teaching whereby the cultural elements of language are of note. That is why, "the recent interest in cultural studies in language learning and the idea of mediating between languages and cultures can be viewed as something of a critique of CLT" (Barro et al., 2001, p. 25).

Consequently, "the by now hidden metaphor of language as a key is both theoretically untenable and educationally unsound" (Byram, as cited in Buttjes & Byram, 1991, p. 18). That is, the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching is no longer that of imparting the learner with a fleet of grammar rules and boringly long vocabulary lists, rather it must be supplemented with attempts to raise the learners' cultural awareness and to develop their cultural understanding. This strand of thought is made even stronger by Byram (1991, p. 18) who asserts that "to separate language and culture teaching is to imply that a foreign language

can be treated in the early learning stages as if it were self-contained and independent of other sociocultural phenomena". The existing bond between foreign language learning and culture integration is also echoed by Roberts et al. (2001, as cited in Byram & Grundy, 2003, p. 20) who are of the opinion that "learning a language should be completed by a sustained and ethnographically structured encounter with the language's culture". The fact remains that language and culture are indeed strictly interwoven as Young et al. (2009, p. 150) put it: "language is a component of culture, it acts as a transmitter of culture and as the main tool for the internationalisation of the culture by the individual" (as cited in Arabski & Wojtaszek, 2011, p. 36).

The fundamental conclusion that can be drawn from the foregoing brief discussion is that foreign language learning is a coin whose two different sides are believed to be the so-called language and culture. These two variables should be taken into consideration when teaching a foreign language is put under the lens. This raises another issue: the importance of cultural awareness which is going to be pursued in what follows.

1.3. Cultural Awareness

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in foreign language teaching and learning so as to meet the ever-changing demands of the brave new world. Interestingly, however, teaching these languages goes far beyond imparting the learner with grammar rules and vocabulary items to cover the so-called culture as well. This implies that there is an evident need for exposing the learner to the alien culture in question in order to broaden his likelihood of accepting its otherness. That is, as universally conceived, there is an urgent need for giving rise to learners who possess cultural awareness in every sense of the word.

2. Culture Shock and Sojourner Adaptation

The term **culture shock** coined by **Oberg (1960)** is one of the most commonly used words to describe the reaction when an individual encounters a new culture. Oberg (1960) defines culture shock as **an'occupational disease**'and he claims that it is caused by anxiety due to the loss of familiar signs and symbols of social practices. It occurs when an individual encounters a new culture, and it often results in a feeling of frustration or hassle.

By losing all familiar social practices, an individual feels uncomfortable in the environment. **The first reaction** to this discomfort is the rejection of the host culture: the sojourner's attitude becomes negative towards the host culture and its people. **The second reaction** is the regression to their home culture : everything about the home culture suddenly looks glorious and only the positive things are remembered. In addition to these reactions, Oberg (1960) states the following 'symptoms' which can be observed when a sojourner is experiencing culture shock:

- A feeling of helplessness and a desire for dependence on long-term residents of one's own nationality;
- Delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country;
- Excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured;
- and finally, that terrible longing to be back home…to talk to people who really make sense.

Oberg (1960) comments that not everyone experiences these symptoms, as the degree of culture shock and its effect differ greatly depending on the individual.

According to Oberg (1960), a sojourner experiences culture shock in four stages:

(i) The honeymoon stage,

(ii) The hostile and frustration stage,

(iii) The recovery stage,

(iv) The adjustment stage.

- **The honeymoon stage**, in the first few weeks, a sojourner is 'fascinated by the new' and excited about everything they see and experience in the new culture.
- **The hostile and frustration stage** however, this dreamlike period normally ends once the sojourner realises that they are not a visitor and have to seriously deal with the culture and the differences as real conditions of their life. This second stage is what Oberg (1960) calls culture shock.

- **The recovery stage** The third stage begins when the sojourner successfully acquires an adequate level of language ability to communicate with the people of that culture. Through the acquisition of language, the sojourner '[gets] to know the people' in the host culture, allowing them to overcome culture shock.

- **The Adjustment Stage.** Although the sojourner is now on the way to recovery at this stage, some difficulties still remain. These are overcome by accepting the difficulties as 'just another way of living', rather than rejecting or denying it. In this final stage, one does not only accept the culture, but also enjoy it.

In addition to these four stages, Oberg (1960) suggests the possibility of having the same process when the sojourner goes back to the home culture after having successfully adapted to the new culture. Therefore, it can be argued that culture shock is an unavoidable negative consequence of the adaptation process to a new culture, which affects everybody.