Teaching Stories: Cultural and Educational Uses of Traditional and Personal Narrative in the Choctaw Language Classroom

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I was talking to the pastor at my church a while back and asked him where he'd been last service. He had missed the last week. He told me he'd had to perform a funeral service. I asked who the service was for and he told me it was for his uncle, George Sealy. I started asking him who his relatives were and it turns out that his uncle is my uncle. He's been my pastor for years and I never knew we were related. That's how it is with Choctaws—you never know who you're related to. You're pretty much related to everyone.

Before removal, the family names were different from how they are now. Back then, we were matrilineal. We had clanships. Your mother's father was called your inkichuffa *and your mother's sister was called* ishkichuffa*. Your father wasn't related to you—he was basically just a visitor in your home. Your family was your mother's clan. It was tribal law that you had to marry outside your clan. Your father's sisters were called -*hokni *and his brothers were -*moshi*. Your aunts' and uncles' kids were your brothers and sisters. Your* inkichuffa *and* ishkichuffa *were in charge of discipline. Everyone could tell you what to do and sometimes you didn't know who to listen to. When I was growing up in Mississippi, that's what I called my uncles and aunts.*

*Now, all aunts and uncles are -*hokni *and -*moshi*. After the removal, with the nuclear family, the names were changed. They pretty much messed everything up. Now, we're related to everybody. In traditional Choctaw, we would only say 'my mother', but*

not 'my father'. 'My mother' is sashki*, using the affected person marker. With the nuclear family, we needed to say 'my father', so we used the recipient marker,* aki*.*

It used to be that when two people wanted to marry, both sides of the family came together for a conference, to compare lineages and if there were any clanship ties the marriage would not take place. Now we still practice this old way. When someone tells you their name, you ask for the names of their grandparents, parents. Chances are you are related. I was talking to a student who said his wife is Choctaw and her grandfather turns out to be my cousin. My grandmother used to say, "If you're going to marry, go across the river." Now, with so much intermarrying into other tribes, you might not just be related to all the Choctaws. You can be related to lots of tribes. Your family grows exponentially. And family names, family members are 'possessed'. You can't just use the root of the word. You have to use a person marker. You can't ever disown them, no matter what they do. Family members are like Elmer's glue—you are stuck together for life.

This narrative, told by my teacher, LeRoy Sealy, as an introduction to a unit on family names, began the weekly Choctaw Language Class. Discussion at these classes frequently involves a degree of introductory gossip. This time, the conversation centered on stories of friends who were found to be relatives, how people were connected to this famous NFL player or that *Mikko (chief)*, and how researching for a CDIB card turned up new family connections. The instructor told stories of cultural change and related them to the language lesson. The students in this class used their own stories of family ties to illustrate their understanding of the traditional ways and to reinforce their own Choctaw identities, their right to be in this class, learning and using this language, just as they use class attendance and the language to reinforce their cultural identity as Choctaws.

The theme that emerged during this class, shared and recreated cultural identity, is not limited to the community class environment, but represents an ongoing community discourse. Mould (2003) describes Choctaw prophetic discourse as maintaining group cultural identity. "Every shift, every change, threatens the notion of what it means to be Choctaw. Choctaw prophecies outline this loss of ethnic and cultural identity… the loss most avidly warned against is the biological loss of identity through intermarriage with other races (p. 197)." Mould argues that one basis for the fear of intermarriage is the loss of language, "as interracial couples…generally choose English as the language spoken in the home…this loss is particularly troubling since the Choctaw language is generally regarded as the single most important symbol of Choctaw identity (p. 198)." In Choctaw, stories serve tie the language to the culture, the people, and the history of the Choctaws. They place the words in context to explain change over time. They include the community and the culture in creating language and also include the language and community in creating culture. In doing so, these narratives bind the people and the words.

1. **Choctaw Story Performance in Community and University Settings**

The Oklahoma Choctaw community strives to maintain its cultural identity. As part of this mission, the tribe sponsors community languages classes. I have attended these community classes for a few years. I have also attended university classes taught by one of the community instructors, LeRoy Sealy. During both class types, LeRoy tells stories. He always tells the Choctaw creation story, *Nanih Waiya*. He also tells many traditional animal tales, historical tales, and personal stories.

In the language classes, whether community or university, he tells the stories in much the same manner. LeRoy tells the creation story with a serious calm and a quiet tone, with little variation and the same degree of intensity. Then he pauses. His tone changes with his next story, usually one of a personal experience that teaches a lesson learned, with a laugh at his own expense. The story is no less a Choctaw story, though. It often includes cultural references to food and family, a youthful mistake, contact with a non-Choctaw, or humorous experiences in teaching the language. The story marks him as Choctaw. The story also demonstrates the shared Choctaw identity of the audience. However, as most of the students in the community classes are Choctaw while most of the university class students are not, I would expect the performances and purposes of his stories to be different.

Indeed, there are some slight differences, not in performance style, but in contextualization. More explanation of the stories' cultural relevance is needed in the university classes. The stories also seem to be more deliberately chosen in these classes. While LeRoy tells the stories in Choctaw and English to the community classes, he tells them primarily in English at the university. Having witnessed this instructor's performances in both settings, I wondered why he includes these stories in the language classes. How do they support language education? Was the objective of telling the stories in the university class language instruction or cultural instruction?

2. Story and Language Learning

Most literature concerning the use of story in the language learning classroom focuses on the practical application of the genre to language teaching, including methods for choosing appropriate tales and activities to foster participation (see Bagg, 1991; Morgan and Rinvolucci, 1988; Hendrickson, 1992) or the potential for using stories in teaching English as a Second Language (see Haulman, 1985; Yuhua, 1999). This literature primarily discusses the benefits to student motivation and understanding. For example, Cantoni (1999) describes the method of Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPR-S) to Native language education, claiming that this type of activity is likely to reduce the learners' 'affective filters' and to provide the type of scaffolding outlined by Vygotsky (1986). Those who justify the inclusion of narrative in the indigenous language classroom do so on the basis of cultural relevance, the centrality of the historical oral narrative to cultural transmission, and the traditionally didactic nature of the oral narratives in a given community (Heredia and Francis, 1997; Ramirez 1999; Yuhua 1999).

There is little discussion of the role of story in creating identity and community in the classroom, though. None of the authors advocating story use in the language classroom describes instructors' motivations behind the use of personal and traditional narrative. Personal narratives often function as a means to create or enhance identity, particularly ethnic identity (Draper, 2003). Stories may also be used to reconnect to a homeland from which the teller is removed temporally, physically, or emotionally (Behar, 1996). Similarly, traditional narrative can function to effectively recreate a cultural identity, personal or community, for successive generations (Palmer, 2003). It is no stretch of the imagination to suggest that stories may be used to like ends within the multicultural classroom. Instructors may use personal and traditional narrative to illustrate

their own identities, as members of a Native community and as authoritative instructors. They may also use stories to create a sense of classroom community, and to introduce students to a linguistic community.

During his classes, LeRoy routinely tells stories. He tells the origin story, the story of Possum's tail, and many personal stories. These stories reveal who he is to the class, that he is a fallible person, a funny person, but foremost, that he is Choctaw. LeRoy doesn't just tell stories in the university classroom, though. His students read traditional Choctaw stories in English and write response essays in English. They read short animal stories in Choctaw and answer questions about them in Choctaw. LeRoy, however, uses very few methods advocated in the second language acquisition literature. He doesn't have the students act out the stories using Total Physical Response, write group stories, retell stories or perform plays. Though most of his stories contain little Choctaw language, all entail some didactic component. As the university class is a language class and not a Choctaw history and culture class, I was puzzled. In order to find out LeRoy's reasoning behind including these assignments, I decided that observation of the classroom would not be sufficient. I needed ask LeRoy directly.

3. Teaching Culture is Teaching Language

I asked LeRoy to lunch with two motives in mind. First, I wanted to thank him for helping me with my ongoing research. He had proven a most patient and receptive collaborator and instructor. Second, I wanted to talk about his storytelling. He knew this and was willing to oblige. I found out during this talk that he felt that teaching culture is teaching language; in fact, students can't understand the language without understanding the culture. He reminded me of that community class session and his story of the changing terminology for family members. He pointed out that some of the Choctaws in that community class were surprised to hear about marriage to cousins and about the matrilineal traditional kinship system, but that armed with that information, they were better able to understand the etymology of the kinship terms.

LeRoy told me that he frequently plans the stories he tells during classes. Often, he chooses stories that both support the language lesson and offer a cultural lesson. LeRoy argues that cultural information is just as important as linguistic information. He explains his intentional use of these stories to impart cultural as well as linguistic knowledge as intended to ground students' language knowledge and performance within an appropriate cultural context. When asked whether he uses cultural instruction often, LeRoy stated:

I try to as much as possible, because this helps the students understand more about the Choctaw way of life, the Choctaw way of thinking and the Choctaw practice—why we do the things we do. Right away, some students will notice that there are some differences from the general way of society to the Choctaw way of society. One is that we don't have a word for goodbye, so there're two ways that we can leave a conversation. One is modeled after the American model, where we say 'Chipisalachiki', but there's no word for 'goodbye'. But the traditional way to end a conversation is that when two people are done talking the conversation is over and we just walk away. Now then, in the Western culture, that seems to be disrespectful. And if I hadn't brought that up, people wouldn't know who are not of this culture would not understand why we do these things.

LeRoy uses three story forms: cultural, traditional, and personal narrative. While all forms serve as cultural lessons, they do so with differing degrees of transparency and relation to the linguistic content. The direct cultural instructional narrative is the most obviously didactic in nature, teaching the culture or history of the tribe as related to the day's language lesson. These lessons usually emphasize a change from the traditional way of living to modern existence. The traditional narrative usually imparts a moral about how to be Choctaw and is less directly related to the language lesson. While the instructional and traditional narratives are usually a planned part of the lesson, the third form, personal narrative, is usually spontaneously produced. This personal narrative form is even further removed from the linguistic content of the lesson. This form, though, serves an additional function, adding a modern example of a sociolinguistic or cultural phenomenon to the instructor's lesson repertoire. This modern element also counters the essentialist assumptions of many non-Natives and underscores the change described in the instructional narrative and creates a living Choctaw identity.

Though LeRoy recognizes the traditional narrative form as distinctive, entailing unique cultural status, he does not see a clear separation between the functions of his narrative forms; all are instructional. Similarly, he does not conceive of cultural and linguistic knowledge as occupying discrete domains. Rather, he explains, sentence-formation knowledge is just one part of knowing how to speak Choctaw. Knowledge of sociolinguistic practices, such as eye-contact avoidance and salutation and departure customs, is equally essential to being a good Choctaw speaker. LeRoy argues that cultural knowledge also helps the students understand and remember more of the language; they are intimately interwoven and neither alone is sufficient to produce a good speaker.

This intertwined relationship is reflected in the manner in which the instructor uses the stories throughout a lesson. The instructor interweaves the stories and language information into one cohesive lesson. The largest domain is usually assigned to the instructional narrative, within which are placed both traditional and personal narrative as supporting examples. The direct linguistic instruction grows from the instructional narrative and is therefore supported by it and often concludes the lesson. These forms can be described as a nested narrative. A visual representation of the organization of this story-lesson performance might look something like the following.

Figure 1

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                    Meta-narrative
              Traditional Narrative    Linguistic/Instructional    Personal Narrative
                                              Narrative
                    Cultural/Instructional Narrative
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Traditional Narrative   Linguistic/Instructional Narrative   Personal Narrative

Meta-narrative

Cultural/Instructional Narrative
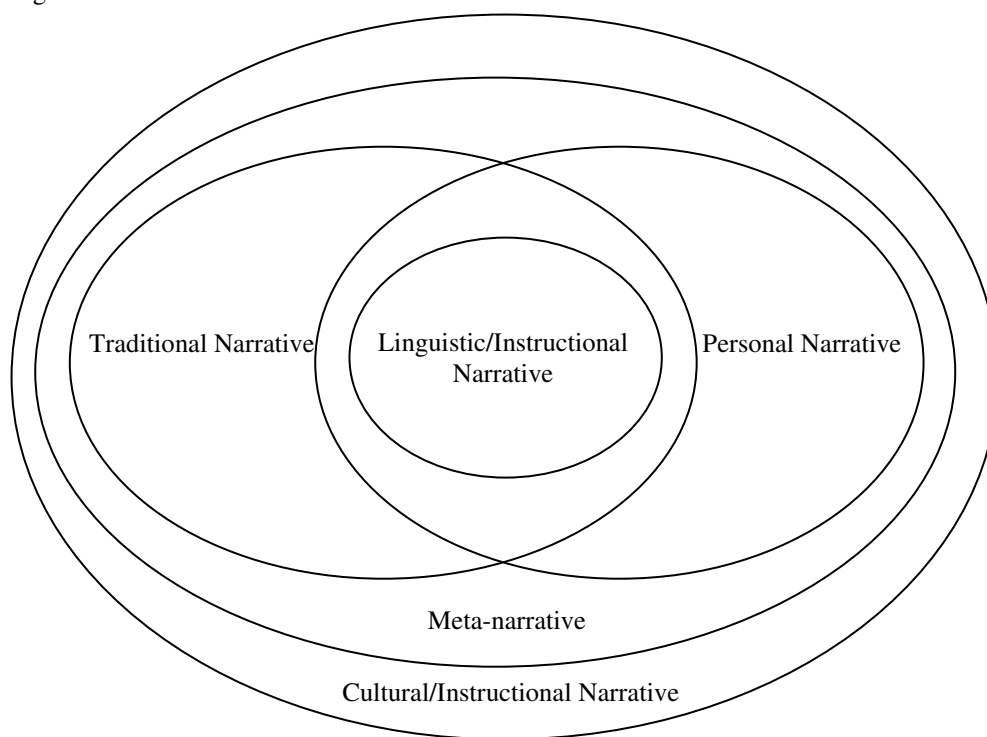
The following instructional story was told by the language instructor in response to an interview question about how Choctaws typically use story to mark their identities. While it does not contain any linguistic narrative, it exhibits this nested narrative style.

> [cultural narrative]
> *Sometimes you have to be careful with advice that's given to you. Some advice is good advice. Some advice may be detrimental. Stories sometimes can be used to give you knowledge about what to look for, how to make distinctions, how to distinguish if when something is being told to you whether it is good or bad. There is a traditional Choctaw story. It's about animals. And, animals in Choctaw stories reflect human beings and their actions.*

[traditional narrative]

So, there was a raccoon whose tail was beautiful. It had a ringed design. It was fluffy. And, he was proud of his tail. And so along comes a possum and the possum saw the raccoon's tail and he wanted his tail to be just like raccoons. So, he asked the raccoon, 'How did you get your tail to have those rings and to be fluffy and so beautiful.' So the raccoon tells him 'This is what I did. I took my tail and wrapped it up in bark and around the bark I wrapped some vines. And I built a fire and stuck my tail into the fire. Then I pulled it out and then took off the vine and took off the bark and then it had rings and was fluffy and beautiful. That's how it got to be the way it is.

Well, possum goes along and does the very same thing. However, the raccoon didn't tell him how long to leave the tail in the fire. So possum left it in a little too long. So when he pulled out his tail and when he took off the vine and took off the bark, his tail was singed. And, that's why the possum doesn't have any hair on his tail.

[meta-narrative]

Well, in the story the raccoon tells the possum to build a fire and stick his tail in it. But he didn't tell him how long to leave it in. So, with that, when people give you advice, it might not be good advice. And if you go and do what they tell you to do or instruct you to do, it might be detrimental to you. So, that's why we use stories for life lessons. But when you tell it in the language, it gives it a different flavor, but at the same time, you still get the same message. People in the communities would tell stories like this for life lessons or tough stories about how personal events in their lives, what it did for them.

[personal narrative]

I remember one time when I was about 12 or 13 years old, I was sent to the store by my father to buy a loaf of bread. And that was all I was supposed to have done. But, when I got to the store-- you know little children, they see a toy and they want the toy, but if they don't have the money, they can't get it. And so, I knew that I just had enough money for the bread. But, I wanted this toy, so I took the toy. And I looked around and I stuck it in my pocket.

So I went on up to the cash register and paid for the bread and went on out the door. Little did I know that somebody was watching me. When I came out the door, he said 'Hey, I want to talk to you.' So, I stopped and looked and he was looking at me. He came over and he said, 'You bought bread didn't you?'

I said 'Yeah'. He said, 'Well, I saw you looking at a toy.' He said, 'what happened to the toy?' I said, 'I put it back.' He said, 'Well, reach in your pocket, there might be something there.' And I knew then that he had seen me take that toy, and so I reached in my pocket and pulled out the toy. And so, I knew that I was caught red handed. I knew that I was in trouble in more ways than one. So, he said, 'Well, do you really want this toy?' And I said, 'Well, yeah, I'd like to have it, but I don't have the money to pay for it.'

He said 'I tell you what, come on get in the car and I'll take you home. I want to talk to your father.' So, I thought, oh, boy, I'm really in trouble. So, I got in his car and come to find out that he was the owner of the store. So, when we got home, I went to the house and I told my father 'The store owner wants to talk to you and he's outside.' But he told my father, 'You know, I'm not going to press charges or anything. But he wants that toy.' He said, 'I think a lesson could be learned out of all of this.' So, he said, 'Let's let him work for that toy.' So he said, 'This is what I want to do. I want your son to come to the store every Saturday morning and he works for a couple of hours. I'll have some things for him to do. And then he can work for that toy.'

And my dad thought, he thought 'that's fine with me'. And so every Saturday morning, I'd get up and go to the store. And so I'd work at Piggly Wiggly's every Saturday morning until the store owner felt that I had worked enough to pay for that toy. But after that, he said, 'You know what? If you keep working, if you come to the store every Saturday morning from now on, I'll pay you for your service.' That was my first job and you know, from that day, I have worked ever since. And I have learned not to steal anymore.

[meta-narrative]
So, just from my personal experience there, I learned that if you work for it, you can get what you need or what you want.

[cultural narrative]
And, so, I tell that story, even to my own family and to other people so that they can see a lesson to be learned. That's what Choctaw stories are all about. You tell stories for a lesson, to learn something from. And, we're losing that because a lot of our children don't know these stories, you know, what they contain and how they can help you even in today's society. Those are some examples of story lessons.

The use of this nested narrative style is particularly appropriate to the Choctaw language classroom, as it reflects the manner in which stories are embedded within the culture, both in content and in form.

4. Traditional and Modern Purposes of Story

In the past, Choctaw stories were primarily traditional animal tales or historical tales that reflected the cultural expectations and limitations placed on the individual or traditional and historical stories designed to recreated cultural identity. Personal narratives were also used, but less frequently. Traditionally, these stories were told to instruct a particular child about how to be a good Choctaw, frequently in response to an unacceptable behavior. Mould (2003) describes the historical role of the Choctaw storyteller. "Historical observations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggest that storytellers were the educators of the tribe, formally teaching the young the history of the tribe through narrative (p. 23)." This use strongly resembles the way they are used in the Choctaw language class. Whether told in a community meeting, an informal gathering, or within the language classroom, stories instruct community members in culturally appropriate behavior and values, while reinforcing community identity.

Mould (2003) describes two broad genres of Choctaw discourse, elders' talk and the *shukha anumpa* (p. 27). The elders' talk includes serious stories such as creation legends, historical legends, and supernatural stories, which often serve to solidify Choctaw community identity. These stories speak to a communal truth and are usually only told by the eldest community speakers. The *shukha anumpa,* or 'hog talk' includes animal stories, jokes, and personal stories. This genre is created freely by community members of all ages. Mould notes that "this distinction is so vital, so ingrained, that narratives that people tell about themselves are often not considered 'stories' at all, at least not the kind of stories that the Choctaw person thinks of when stories and storytelling are mentioned (p. 27)." While LeRoy definitely considers personal narratives among his repertoire of story genres, the fact that the inclusion of traditional narratives in a lesson is deliberately planned while personal narratives emerge organically during lessons, without forethought, indicate that he does consider the two forms as distinct.

Mould describes differences between the traditional or historical stories and recent stories in linguistic marking reminiscent of the distinction between the remote past and recent past markings *–ttok* and *–tok*, respectively (p. 28). Mould notes that elder story genres, such as historical and supernatural legends, are often told to adult audiences with a serious intent to recall a formal historical content as exhibited by the storyteller's trance-like pose, eyes closed and introspective. Also, animal stories and jokes are often told to both audiences in a more extroverted performance style (Mould, 2003, p. 25-27). This distinction is reflected in the different tones employed by LeRoy in telling the origin story and personal stories. He performs traditional narratives with a serious and introspective demeanor, using a quiet voice, but tells personal narratives in a much more animated and intimate style, with more variation in tone and with a good deal of expressiveness.

These two types of narrative, traditional and personal, may be told side by side to complement each other, or one may be nested within the context of another. LeRoy often interrupts his telling of a traditional tale to relate how this story mirrors something that has happened to him personally. Conversely, I have also heard other Choctaw storytellers set a traditional tale within a personal narrative, for example telling a story about an uncle who in turn tells a traditional animal tale. This is not a new storytelling performance style. Mould describes the traditional interweaving of elder talk and personal narrative as a reflective of the temporal overlapping of cultural knowledge and personal experience in the Choctaw community and individual construction of identity.

> The history of the Choctaw is best understood as tribal memory…The long ago past exists only in passed-down stories, whether written or oral. This is the history of greatest cultural symbolism: rabbit sticks and blow-guns; prophets and rain men. But quickly, tribal history makes a jump to remembered experience: house dances and stickball games; hog roasts and farming…In between, there are flashes of event-driven history: the great leader Pushmataha and removal to Oklahoma, events and people so dramatic, so memorable, so influential, they are remembered within this slower tradition of history. A history of the Choctaw culled from this memory, from the stories, the oral history, still told today, is a tapestry of event and custom, of the personal and the tribal (Mould, 2003, p. xxxi).

This interwoven tapestry is exactly the type of story performance LeRoy employs in his university language class. The use of the traditional and personal stories in his class appears particularly appropriate, therefore, to teaching both culture and language.

5. Story, Culture and Non-Native Students

The difference in student background between the community and university classes has significant impact on the form of dialog used. The university class is comprised of mostly non-Native students. These students, coming from a Western background steeped in an ideology of egocentrism, linear descent, literacy, and Western scientific thinking, experience a greater pretextual gap than do Native students. They have greater potential difficulty comprehending semantic distinctions and classifications evident in the Choctaw language as well as greater potential for orientalist interpretation of Choctaw culture. To bridge this pretextual gap, LeRoy employs strategies to contextualize the lesson content, such as repetition, framing, reframing, vocabulary choice, qualifying vocabulary, and narrative lesson style.

A primary method of contextualizing the vocabulary in the university classes is through cultural narrative. The cultural content of Choctaw I provides context for the basic conversational forms and vocabulary domains, such as food ways, leisure activities, and modes of communication. For example, food vocabulary is grounded in discussion of the importance of corn, *tanchi,* in the traditional Choctaw diet and the relationship of the stickball game, *kapucha,* to festival meetings, such as Green Corn, intra-community conflict resolution, and warfare training. While the forms of activities are different from those typical of Western culture, there is little likelihood of pretextual gap. These cultural ways are easily transmitted to students, as all cultures engage in food, leisure, and community activities.

Similarly, stories serve the purpose of contextualizing the linguistic and cultural lesson material to bridge the potential pretextual gap experienced by non-Native students. Cultural content contextualizes the traditional oral literature and the variety of grammatical forms employed in fluent speech. For example, tense marking is evidenced by the difference in personal narrative usage of the recent past tense *–tok* and traditional narrative usage of the remote past *–ttok*. Switch reference marking within sentences plays a significant role in fluent story performance. Students may also become familiar with the prevalence of multiple meanings of a morpheme when used in different contexts. Most importantly, though, the students in LeRoy's university class learn the historical and cultural background of the Choctaw language much as Choctaw youth would, by listening to elder stories, but not necessarily retelling them.

While LeRoy uses stories to promote his Choctaw identity, strengthening his voice and increasing the likelihood that student uptake will match the intended message, LeRoy's identity is not the only one created through his storytelling. In addition to the historical background of the language forms and practices, LeRoy's stories teach his students appropriate cultural norms associated with speaking and listening to the Choctaw language. In this way the students are invested with cultural knowledge and therefore share in the Choctaw identity. Stories illustrate to the students how to 'be Choctaw', an essential element in learning how to speak Choctaw.

6. Implications for Language Education Research

The goal of this type of traditionally Choctaw story-based pedagogy is clearly enculturation of language students toward developing their communicative competence, as outlined by Hymes (1964). Though teaching culture in the language class is widely accepted within the second language education literature (see Byram, 1990; Knutson, 2006; Paige, et. al., 2000; Roswell, 2007; Savignon and Sysoyev, 2002; Tang, 1999; Zapata, 2005), education literature in general suggests teaching methods should reflect the students' cultural background and expectations (see Holliday, 1994; Lipka, 1989; Sfard and Prusak, 2005). This student culture-centered perspective holds even within discussion of story-based instruction, as Ghosn (2004) argues for a match between story content and students' cultural backgrounds. LeRoy's methods, however, reflect the cultural context of the target language/culture, not those of the non-Native students. Though LeRoy's use of this story-based enculturation seems a most appropriate method for imparting both linguistic and cultural knowledge for the native Choctaw students in the community class, for the non-Choctaw students in the university class, the effectiveness of this pedagogy remains unclear.

Though the students appear to enjoy the stories, the structure of the course and its assessment techniques do not readily permit evaluation of the effect of these stories and their method of delivery on students' linguistic or cultural learning. Additional research aimed at discovering the relationship between this method of story use and learning outcomes is needed. Such research may find that this method of story-based instruction is more effective at imparting communicative competence, though less effective at imparting linguistic competence. Differences in uptake among Native and non-Native students may also emerge, as might differences based on students' other prior cross-cultural experiences. Evaluation of the effectiveness of storytelling in second language instruction is notably infrequent in the second language acquisition and teaching literature, as is empirical study of type-of-instruction effect (Norris and Ortega 2000). Investigation of this type of story-based instruction, therefore, potentially offers a wealth of information relevant to the fields of second language instruction and native language revitalization.

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