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The Weight of Our Words: Language and Teacher Agency from the Perspective of Gee's 'Cultural Models'

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I suggest that one way to enhance teacher agency is to practise greater linguistic awareness in our professional conversations. Based on a conceptual framework utilising the idea of 'cultural models' (everyday theories expressed in language) I analyse primary data of Malaysian English-language teachers' meetings to show two ways in which they have an impact on practice and agency. Based on the evidence, I claim that cultural models [1] function as problem-framing devices and [2] can support transformations in practice. The data in this paper comes from audio-visual recordings of teacher meetings, generated as part of a larger study on teacher collaborative discourse in professional learning communities (PLC), with English-language teachers at Malaysian national secondary schools. Based on these findings, I argue that teacher agency—defined as the capacity to make a difference in the context of teachers' work—is partly a function of how teachers *speak* about the relevant domains of their practice, be they students, subject or pedagogy. This offers practitioners who wish to be more agentic in their practice some relevant points for reflection.

KEYWORDS: teacher agency, cultural models, social linguistics, professional learning communities, Malaysia

Introduction

Teacher agency can be defined and conceptualised in a range of ways, with different emphases and nuances (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). A satisfactory definition, in my view, is to call it *the capacity to make a difference*, according to their values and moral purpose (Frost, 2006). This definition begs the question: what are the skills, dispositions, practices, and activities that make up teachers' ability to 'make a difference', to have a positive impact on their own, their colleagues' and students' learning?

In this article, I address *one* aspect of social practice that has an impact on teacher agency: language. It has been argued that our actions are to an extent reflections of our thoughts and beliefs (Bruner, 1996). Gee (2015) adds a valuable contribution to this theoretical perspective by pointing out that our thoughts are in part dependent on the forms of *language* we use, which themselves are imbued with values, assumptions, and meanings. This implies that *agency* to an extent relies on *language*—in the case of teachers, language used in relation to domains of practice such as students, subject knowledge and pedagogy.

Literature Review

The central concept I use is Gee's notion of 'cultural models'. These refer to the linguistic manifestation of people's everyday theories for simplifying and making sense of complexity, and can be said to be synonymous with terms like 'folk theories', 'frames', 'scripts', 'mental models', 'figured worlds' or 'lived ideologies' (Gee, 2015: 113-115), each possessing their respective emphases and nuances.

Undoubtedly, cultural models exist 'in our heads', but also exist 'out there', in spoken and written form. Cultural models constitute a characteristic way of saying, doing and being that enables one to be recognised as a particular type of person acting in a particular context. Crucially, cultural models are 'ideologies' in that they are necessarily simplifications of external reality, mental 'shorthand' to assist sense making and to make judgements about what things mean based on context and experience.

Some examples of cultural models can be the labels we use for our students like 'fast kids', 'slow kids', 'lazy kids', 'strong kids' or 'simple kids'. Each of these labels function as categories for interpreting our lived realities as teachers. While each expression no doubt at least partially reflects external reality, that is not the same as saying an idea like 'these are slow kids' is the complete unvarnished truth—reality is often more complicated, and therefore our labels can always be questioned, subject to more nuance or at least open to revision (Horn, 2007). Sometimes when people say 'slow', they mean 'unintelligent', or 'less competent', yet we know that quickness and intelligence are not the same thing.

Gee argues that we invariably see the world, both consciously and unconsciously, through the lenses supplied by language or some other symbolic systems—'we could not think, talk or act without them' (p. 112). Because cultural models are such a fundamental part of social life, the models that we hold to and express are highly consequential. They are not 'just talk and no action' but function to *ground* our beliefs and *inform* our actions (Gee, 2015; Black, 2007; Maxwell, 2014). After all, human beings are reflexive, meaning-making creatures, possessing capacities such as agency and sense-making (Smith, 2010). Therefore, it follows that concepts and beliefs make a difference to actions, even though the relationship between beliefs/theories and actions is complicated, often indirect, and sometimes inconsistent (Biesta, 2020; Tam, 2015). It is for this reason that I say *ground* and *inform*, not *determine*. Obviously, words and actions do not *always* align with one another—in fact, for various reasons words should not always be taken at face value (Hammersley, 2003); however, that is not to say that words do not have any impact whatsoever. On that proviso, I propose a working conceptual framework (Figure 1).

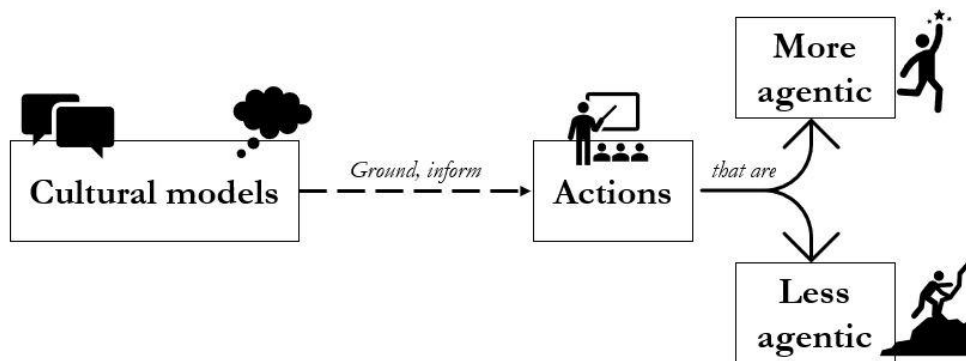

Figure 1.0. Cultural Models, Actions and Teacher Agency -- A Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is straightforward: [1] our cultural models (the thinking-and-speaking constructs that we create to make sense of the world and to achieve our purposes) function to [2] ground and inform our actions, [3] in ways that can be more or less agentic. This simple framework provides us a mental model for how the concepts in the study hang together. However, what does the evidence say?

The Empirical View

Studies have shown that teachers' cultural models for *categorising* their students are consequential, mediating pedagogical decisions by individual teachers (Daniels, 2006, Olson, 1999; Davis, 2007) and shaping the institutional, school-wide decisions, sometimes with problematic equity outcomes (Mehan, 1993; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Horn, 2007; Säljö & Hjörne, 2009). For example, mathematics' teachers' labelling of students as 'fast kids, slow kids, lazy kids' framed decision-making about their learners (Horn, 2007; see also Louie, 2017). Moreover, Louie (2018) demonstrated that teachers' cultural models about their students can shape what they notice or miss about their students' strengths. Problematically, it was found that dominant ideologies or frames about students worked ended up positioning students from non-dominant communities as mathematically deficient rather than as sense-makers whose ideas can and should be used as the basis for further learning.

Moreover, teachers' cultural models about themselves and even the nature of knowledge itself had an effect on whether they could develop more inclusive cultural models of their students. Louie (2016) shows how, even in a seemingly 'ideal' PLC where teachers engaged thoroughly with the tensions between restrictive and inclusive discourses about mathematical competence, certain 'dominant discourses' about the nature of professional knowledge (as idiosyncratic and personal, rather than shareable and open to debate) had the effect of undermining their attempt to reframe their work in more expansive and inclusive ways.

To put it simply, the evidence suggests that our linguistically-bound concepts shape what we notice or think possible, thereby indirectly shaping agency, or our different 'horizons of possibility'

(Rainio & Hofmann, 2015). To make concrete what I mean, this paper will describe some illustrative examples taken from the Malaysian ELT context.

Method

Overview

In this paper I use two case studies, taken from a larger research project on teacher learning in collaborative discourse among Malaysian English-language teachers. The data were generated over a nine-month period, through video-recordings of teacher meetings in two national secondary schools. The data are 'naturally-occurring' in that the data is based on activities which would have happened absent of external involvement—unlike interviews, which are specific social situations that are elicited by researchers (Silverman, 2013). An implication of this is that the data are not of teachers responding to a researcher's questions, but interacting with their colleagues without external interference.

Sampling and Case Selection

I conducted a 'two-stage' sampling procedure. The first stage was conducted on purposive sampling logic, specifically the 'critical case' strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Schools were approached on the basis of being 'best case scenarios', reputed to be committed to forming and maintaining professional learning communities (PLCs). As the purpose of the project was to study collaborative discourse, there would have been little point selecting a school whose teachers did not meet regularly. On these criteria, two schools agreed to participate.

The PLC initiative is a key ingredient in the national strategy for teacher professional development in Malaysia. Its influence began with the introduction of the Lesson Study circa 2011, with subsequent expansion and refinement in 2013 under the Malaysian Education Blueprint and 2019 under the 'New Narrative in Educational Practice' (Tiong, 2019). The idea behind PLCs is to increase teacher capacity through collaboration that focuses on ensuring students learn. This policy initiative is an opportunity for researchers to study teacher conversations, since dialogue is an essential component of PLCs (Tiong, 2019).

The second stage of sampling entailed within-data sampling (Mason, 2018). This approach is relevant with research where the researcher does not influence what is said or done by participants, and therefore generates data that are highly varied. This sampling takes a theoretically relevant question and 'mines' the data for parts that can answer the question, in accordance with abductive reasoning and the search for analytical surprise (Timmermans & Tavory, 2014). Stage two was conducted after the meeting data were transcribed verbatim and narrative summaries were produced of each meeting. Moreover, the meetings were divided into 'episodes' that mark coherent topical shifts in the data.

Data Generation and Ethics

The audio-visual data were collected with a Panasonic HC-V770 Camcorder, combined with three accessories: a compatible tripod, a set of Sennheiser ew 100 G3 wireless transmitters, and an EM-

700 boundary microphone (paired to transmitters). The equipment allowed for the camera to be positioned to capture all the participants within a wider frame while being less obtrusive. Similarly, the small and unassuming microphone was positioned equidistant to participants so that the recording captured participants' speech clearly (Figure 2.0).

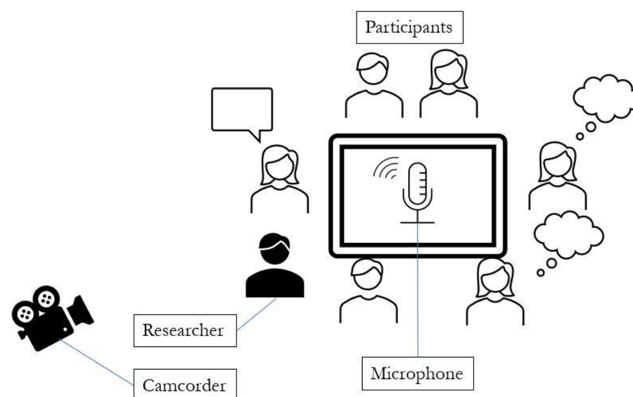

Figure 2.0. Audio-Visual Data Collection

Audio-visual data allows for more direct examination of teachers' collaborative discourse than other methods. Moreover, it allows for multiple viewings, so that the analyst may consider different perspectives and notice aspects of the data that may be missed at first glance (as would be the case if relying only on observation notes), which help safeguard validity and reliability. Video use had various ethical implications, including the heightened risk that the data would be more performative than naturalistic. Nonetheless, the advantages of video were deemed to outweigh its anticipated risks, and various steps were taken to mitigate potential downsides and risk. These steps include extensive rapport-building and visits to school before recording. The research was conducted with the consent of the participants, and with prior approval by relevant governing authorities (EPRD, JPN).

Data Management and Analysis

The video data were transcribed verbatim and segmented into episodes for analysis. Moreover, multi-episode 'chains' were created to allow for analysis that 'zooms out' to capture the development of ideas over a longer period of time, across episodes in single meetings, and across meetings among the same teachers (see Mercer, 2008 for the various methodological justifications involved). These moves provided flexible units that enable granular analysis while also capturing wider horizons of context, which are relevant for making sense of the data (Little, 2002).

In terms of analysis, the literature examined above informed my decision to focus on teachers' cultural models about their *students.* The key move for analysis was to infer what teachers' cultural models were, based on three kinds of indicators. The first indicator was to read direct claims that teachers made about their students (as seen in the S7O1 data below). The second indicator was to locate teachers' expression of surprise, which would suggest a prior cultural model that was contrary to what was expressed. Finally, the third indicator was to infer from an utterance with a

normative component, such as the identification of a problem. To claim that something is a problem suggests a value-laden cultural model about how things should be (as seen in the S1O9 data below). Overall, the analysis process was iterative and based on abductive reasoning, that is to consistently work with multiple possible interpretations to every instance and engage in counterfactual thinking to adjudicate between them (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The three indicators above were used in dialogue with contextual details captured in the video data as well as through the researcher's field notes.

Results

Cultural Models in the Framing of Problems of Practice

I begin first with data that show, at a basic level, one way cultural models are visibly employed in teachers' workplace interactions: to make sense of or 'frame' problems of practice. To do this, I refer to data from a '*dialog prestasi*' where the teachers discussed their students' performance, predicted their likely grades for the next examination sitting (SPM) and shared and discussed potential interventions.

In this episode, a teacher (Elia) talks about the students in her class (5 Elanor):

Meeting S1O9, Episode 2 (Part 1)

1 ELIA : Okay, shall I start with my 5 ELANOR.
2 TULIP : Yes, please. 5 ELANOR, okay.
3 ELIA : My 5 ELANOR, we had twelve students there, but out of the 12, only eight are regulars.
4 TULIP : You mean come to school?
5 ELIA : Yes, <u>four</u>, every <u>week</u> you can find them being absent and having a straight face, they can get called down, they will go and explain, come back and still have a straight face and <u>be absent</u> again. And…
6 MAWAR: Their excuse for being absent?
7 ELIA : One is actually… the one who is every week, HASVINDER, he will pass <u>definitely</u>, but he has an OKU mother needing help at <u>home</u>. [2:00] [Chorus of 'Oh…']
8 She is a single <u>parent</u>, and an auntie helps him with transport to the school. So there are days when his mother needs him to be at home… and he's at home. He will pass, he <u>could</u> be better than that, but… because he's absent all the <u>time</u>… mm, not too sure. So that's HASVINDER.

This ideas expressed here were fairly commonplace in both participating schools, where teachers report their students as facing various home-based challenges. Elia singles out one student, Hasvinder, who 'will pass' but '<u>could</u> be better than that'. This, based on indicator 3, implies the cultural model that it is preferable to do as well as one possibly can—and reflects Elia's judgement as teacher that Hasvinder's results fall below his potential. It is clear that Elia thinks that this is a *problem*. The conversation continues and Elia's colleagues probe her claims more closely.

Meeting S1O9, Episode 2 (Part 2)

10 MAWAR: How are her marks, in the recent mid-year exams?
11 ELIA : No la, not yet lah.
12 TULIP : We've only finished with 5 ISTARI.
13 MAWAR: See how, see how (??)
14 ELIA : How he does? Okay.
15 MAWAR: How about the March test?
16 ELIA : He passed. He got 53. That kind of marks.
17 TULIP : Last year? Uh… did he pass?
18 ELIA : Yes.
19 TULIP : Can pass?
20 ELIA : Yes, can pass.
21 TULIP : In his fifties? Forties?
22 ELIA : Fifties.
23 MAWAR: Okay lah, 50s is okay lah.
24 TULIP : D's are better than G's.

To begin with, Mawar asks Elia about Hasvinder's marks in the recent mid-year examinations. In response, Elia reports that Hasvinder passed the most recently available test; however, by saying 'He got 53. That kind of marks', Elia conveys disappointment, persisting with the same problem framing. As the episode continues, however, a shift can be observed as Mawar and Tulip suggest an alternative perspective. Mawar's statement that Hasvinder's score was 'Okay lah. 50s is okay lah' is supported by Tulip, who claimed that 'D's are better than G's', referring to the grade system in place at the school.

How can these findings be interpreted? I would argue that the question here is not about 'correctness', or who is 'right' or 'wrong'—but what we can reason about the consequences of statements. At face value, Elia, Mawar and Tulip all make valid claims, but with different emphases that have different *implications*. One might argue that Elia's problem framing maintains a level of tension between the current state of affairs and her desired state, which is that Hasvinder performs closer to perceived potential. Mawar and Tulip's cultural model is more concessionary. In their view, Hasvinder *may* be a problem, but it *could* be worse. 'D's are better than G's'. The problem therefore becomes reframed as less urgent or problematic.

These findings are consequential, because as I observed in the other parts of the data, whenever teachers issued a stronger problem framing, they would 'stay' with the problem for longer, dissecting its nuances more carefully and exploring potential solutions. The same commitment to issues was reduced whenever problems were reframed to be less problematic, such as in dealing with Hasvinder. Therefore, it appears that teachers' cultural models indeed contribute to problem framing, which then influences further action.

Shifts in Cultural Models Preceding Transformations in Practice

Next, I use another case to show that shifts in teachers' cultural models can precede and support transformations in practice. The episode is taken from a meeting where teachers were taking turns to talk about problems of practice and to suggest solutions. Prior to this episode, one teacher (Dahlia) had shared a writing scaffold she had found online, the 'O.R.E.O.'. Named after household biscuit brand, this stands for 'Opinion, Reason, Evidence, Opinion', a basic mnemonic device (Putnam, 2015) to help students organise their writing. Upon sharing the idea, Dahlia left the meeting to retrieve her materials so that she could demonstrate to her colleagues. This episode begins just as Dahlia returns:

Meeting S7O1, Episode 4 (Part 1)
DAHLIA : Okay this is the one… that uh ((lofts a laminated paper describing the OREO framework))
ROS : Oreo.
MELUR : Oreo
ROS : Eh… I've seen this one. ((reaches to take it from MELUR – studies it)) If only they can write reasons ((laughs)) to start with ((laughs))
DAHLIA : Yea yea the reason is yes, of course they can
ALAMANDA : Eh they can give reasons. They can, seriously.

Ros' reaction to O.R.E.O. was to exclaim: 'if only they [the students] can write reasons to start with.' This remark was not uncharacteristic of the general view in that school, whose students struggled with learning English. The point about students being able to reason was relevant, as the success of the O.R.E.O. tool depends on that ability. In this case, Ros's words communicated a particular cultural model of their students. However, this was quickly rebutted by Alamanda and Dahlia. The rebuttals are emphatic—note their language ('of course' and 'they can, seriously'). To back up their claims, these colleagues offer evidence contrary to Ros' claim, mostly via replays of students demonstrating the ability to reason, in and out of class:

Meeting S7O1, Episode 4 (Part 2)
DAHLIA : Ok one topic I gave them… I gave them a very simple topic what uh what is the best pet, what is the best pet. I just ask them that
ALAMANDA : Students are late to school, they'll give reasons ah for example
DAHLIA : =What is the best pet then they say la bird la this and that okay I said, that is your opinion. Your opinion is –
ALAMANDA : They're creative [ROS: Yea] very creative, they can say all kinds of things.
DAHLIA : =Ah then they can say ah dog is the bes- best pet. Okay then I say why?
MELUR : Mm.
DAHLIA : So uh they say loving la cute la ah ah then okay put there cute and then loving ((mimes writing both words out)) uh:: then active, playful, ok put by one by one –
ALAMANDA : Then then they know how to construct the sentence
DAHLIA : Then, give me reason. Simple only, ask them to write.
ROS : =You have extra anot or you only printed one.
DAHLIA : I only printed one and uh but I I uh I can uh
ALAMANDA : You can photocopy, easy.

ROS : Share share la
ALAMANDA : =Share

Alamanda argues that in everyday situations, such as students being late for school, they are able to give reasons. She concludes that they are ‘very creative’. Dahlia supports Alamanda’s argument by giving examples of an actual classroom activity she conducts with the student, mimicking their answers and pairing them with the O.R.E.O. framework. The episode ends with Ros requesting that Dahlia shares the printout with her, an implicit display of agreement. I suggest that this marks a shift from the cultural model that ‘our students can’t reason’ to ‘students *can* reason’, supporting the adoption of O.R.E.O. into the teachers’ repertoire of practice. This was found to be a consequential achievement, evidenced by how, in subsequent meetings, the teachers adopted, adapted, and integrated the OREO strategy into their teaching repertoire (Figure 3.0).

Figure 3.0 traces the discursive development of the O.R.E.O. tool, specifically by Ros across five meetings, over six months. Given that it was Ros’ pessimistic view of students which triggered S7O1.4, it was significant to see these developments. The sequence in Figure 3.0 begins with S7O1.4, which I have just discussed, where Ros was won over by her colleagues’ view.

Ros’ story does not end there. In the next meeting after a month (S7O2.2), another colleague (Embun) was vexed about being required to conduct an action-research project, to be reported to the District Education Office (*Pusat Pendidikan Daerah*). In response to Embun’s problem, Ros pipes up to suggest that she should just use O.R.E.O., saying that it’s ‘good, it’s easy’. Alamanda agrees, saying it ‘works for her too’. Although in this episode Ros does not elaborate, at face value this suggests Ros had either tried it out herself and found it helpful, or at least been persuaded that it would be.

More evidence of the progress in Ros thinking is displayed in S7O4, which happens about two months after S7O2. In this meeting, Ros enthusiastically explained how she had integrated O.R.E.O. with ‘I-Palm SVO’ (a separate teaching tool, to do with subject-verb agreement), giving a complex and detailed retelling of how she does that in her class (S7O4.11a). Subsequently, in S7O4.11b, Ros elaborates that O.R.E.O. is not only useful for organising students’ written work, as Dahlia had suggested, but also for helping students structure their verbal participation in the PT3 (*Penilaian Tahap 3*) assessments. She continued by making links to the Ministry’s assessment training which she had attended, replaying a detailed scenario in which she uses O.R.E.O. to help her students prepare for it.

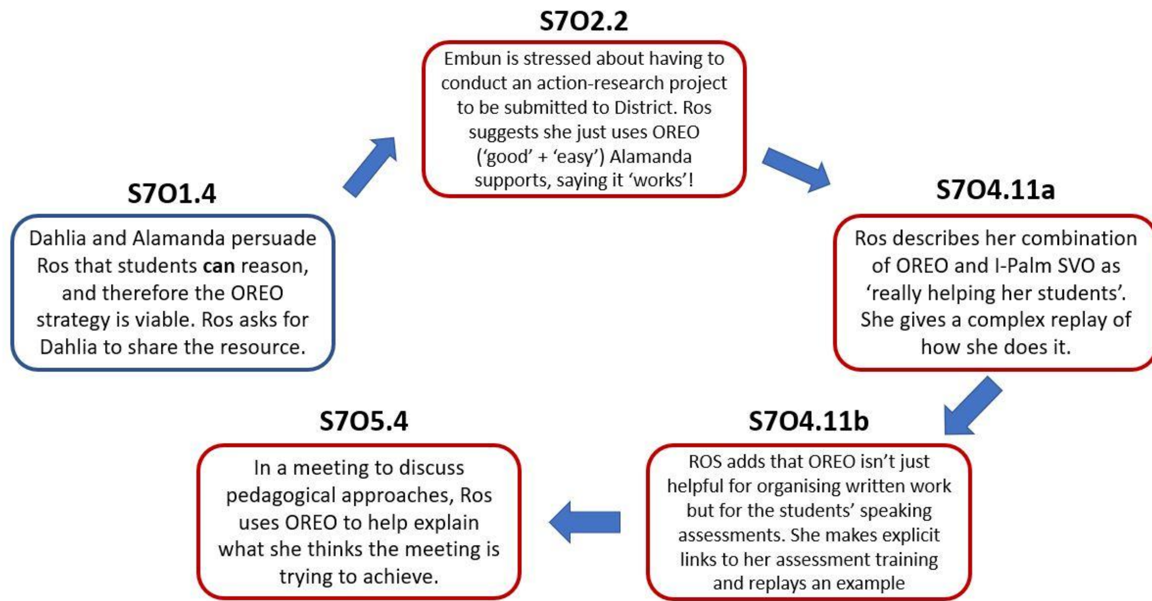

Figure 3.0. Ros' Story Over 6 Months

These three episodes suggest that Ros did not only adopt the tool but adapted and integrated it with others in her repertoire of practice. Another month later, in a meeting with members from the History department (S7O5.4), Ros used OREO to help explain essay-writing scaffolds to a History teacher. This shows that the tool had become part of her language for talking about practice, such that she was using it to explain it to colleagues outside the group.

Overall, this case study demonstrates a clear sense of progression, the seed of an idea (O.R.E.O.) being planted and going through iterative cycles of trials and reflection, where the strategy is not merely implemented, but adapted and integrated within a wider repertoire of practice. While it is not possible to definitely say that this is *caused* by the shift in teachers' cultural model in S7O1.4, at the very least it can be said that the shift contributed, or removed barriers, for these further developments. It is hard to imagine that the uptake would have been so positive had the teachers persisted with the discourse that 'it would never work with our kids, they can't reason'.

Discussion

Due to limited space, this paper only presents two case studies of how cultural models influence what we think and do, individually and collectively. The examples show that cultural models are not necessarily static—they can change and shift, with implications on agency. Both cases showed opposing cultural models interacting with one another in teachers' discussions of their problems of practice. In S1O9 we saw how cultural models contribute to the problem framing, expressing meanings that would have implications on what further action to take. S7O1's optimistic shift in how teachers' conceptualised their students' capabilities was shown to support, or at least reduce barriers to, Ros' adoption and integration of a new teaching tool into her repertoire of practice. Future research may perhaps look more closely at the discursive manoeuvres, tools and conditions

that can support those shifts in teachers' cultural models, both within and beyond the conversations that take place in professional meetings.

This paper has important limitations. Firstly, I have had to be selective in the data presented—therefore this study does not make claims of generalisability, nor of capturing the full range of possible variations to this phenomenon. I do think however that the data here offer proof of concept about my argument about language and teacher agency. Another limitation is that changes in beliefs do not necessarily entail changes in actions, nor the other way around: there will be situations where actions change without corresponding conceptual modification, and vice versa (Tam, 2015). To this I will say two things. Firstly, I would argue, as others have, that changing the way we talk about our work, while not a *guarantee* of change, is at least an *opportunity*, or requisite for it (Rainio & Hofmann, 2015; Virkkunen et al., 2012). Secondly, I would argue that changes in actions *without* the supporting conceptual change is only surface-level change, and is therefore relatively fragile. Pedagogical transformation would likely have more depth and resilience if behaviour and cultural models or beliefs go hand in hand.

Lastly, I am not arguing that all we need to improve agency is to change the way we talk about our work. From an 'ecological' perspective, teachers' fields of actions always interact with the structures around them, be it institutions, policy or societal constraints and enablers (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Context will always be a matter to agency, and so better policy and design, whether in the domain of school leadership, teacher appraisal, working conditions, professional development, or initial teacher training, are all important parts of the larger, more complex equation.

This paper pertains to just a small part of that equation, close to an individual's sphere of influence. While there is no doubt that there are structural constraints that should be acknowledged and addressed, an accessible 'low-hanging' fruit for change is to at least be have greater awareness about our assumptions and concepts, expressed in how we talk, which do have some influence on our practice.

Returning to the study's initial conceptual framework, some additions and alterations may be made (Figure 4.0), emphasising the dynamic aspect of the findings—that cultural models can change and shape more or less agentic action. The figure shows that one pathway for changing our practice as teachers is to start by reflecting on the language we use about our practice.

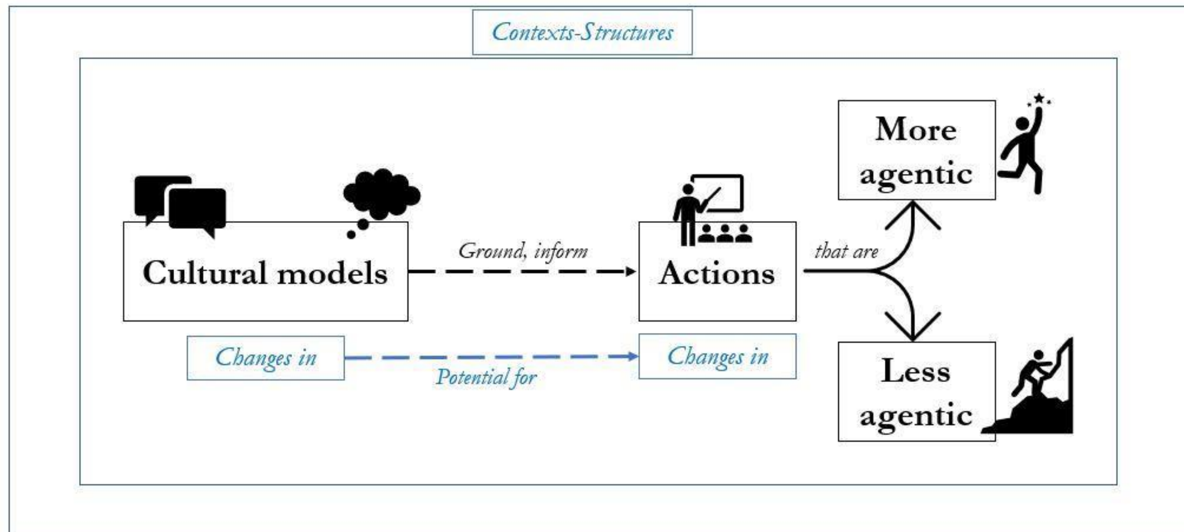

Figure 4.0. Revised Conceptual Framework based on Findings

Conclusion

The findings suggest that, in the interest of teacher agency and educational improvement, we should attend to the processes by which we can shape the linguistically-bound concepts that we employ in our work. PLCs are but one of many contexts where this is possible—indeed it has been argued that teachers' on-the-job discourse in informal settings may be more influential than what happens in formal professional development (Lefstein, Vedder-Weiss & Segal, 2020). In this paper at least, the two cases show that discourse in PLCs can create shifts to cultural models that are either more agentic or less so.

Practically speaking, I observe that we tend to think of professional meetings (in the Malaysian context: PLC meetings, *dialog prestasi*, CPD, panel meetings, so on), as sites where teachers exchange ideas, tell stories, and distribute tasks. My hope is that this paper raises the awareness that professional conversations are also implicitly where beliefs and attitudes (expressed linguistically) collide and interact, with consequences on what happens in classrooms.

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