

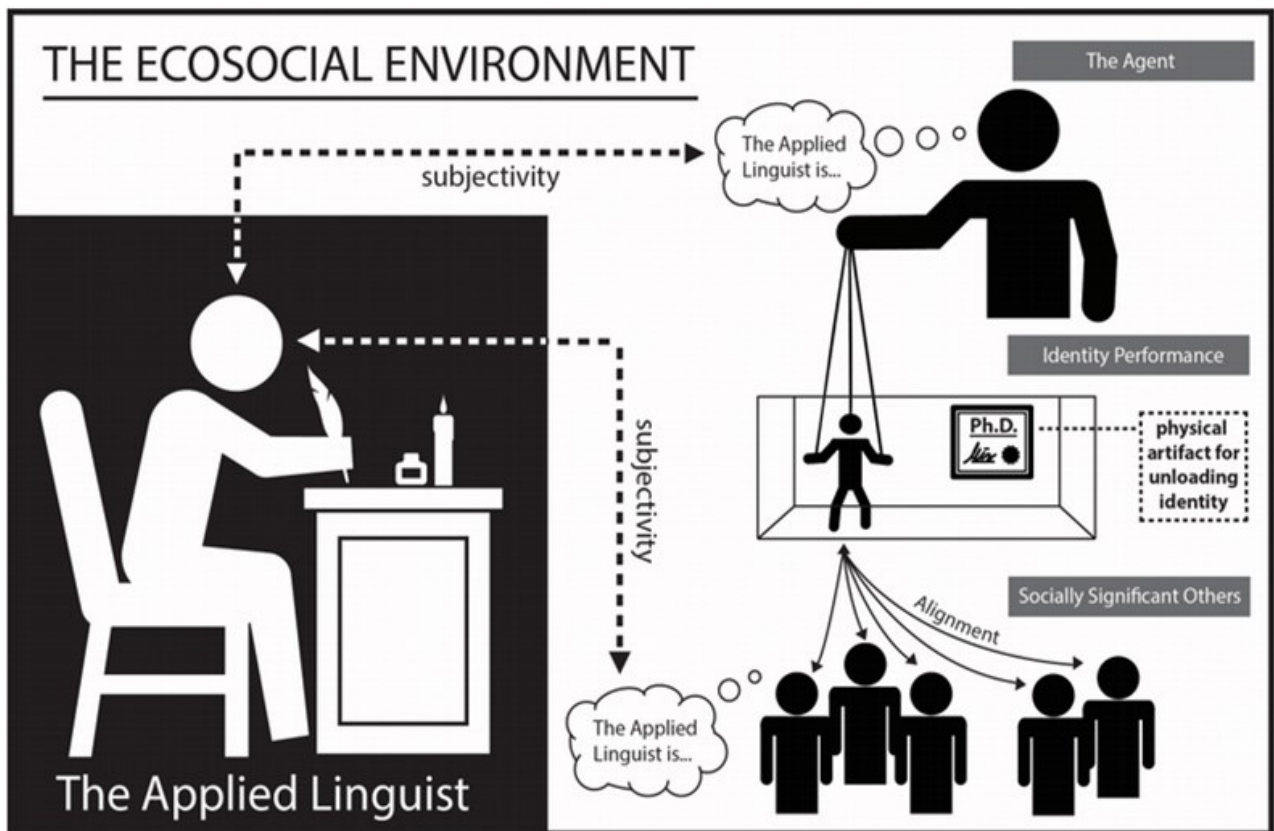
# From Scribbles to Scholarship

by **Joshua M. Paiz**, *The George Washington University, United States of America*

Email: [jpaiz@gwu.edu](mailto:jpaiz@gwu.edu)

## Abstract:

*In this short research reflection, the author shares how taking on advice with which he initially disagreed unlocked a powerful tool to crafting stronger, more accessible theory.*



There are a few truisms of higher education in the United States and, perhaps, globally. First, students from lower socioeconomic statuses are less likely to complete a degree or continue to graduate education (Titus, 2006). Second, students from minoritized backgrounds are less likely to complete a degree or to continue to graduate education (e.g., Burger, 2018; Garrett, 2022). Being the son of blended-ethnicity parents in a family

that fluctuated between the lower-middle class and the working poor, my prospects didn't look good, which makes setbacks sting all the more. As I navigated my way through graduate studies, I found that my background often left me feeling like an outsider in academic spaces, struggling to find my footing in the world of advanced theory and research. This sense of being an outsider was particularly acute when I encountered the

complex theoretical frameworks that are central to our field, leaving me feeling overwhelmed and unsure of my ability to contribute meaningfully to academic discourse.

The fact is that even in an inclusive discipline like TESOL/applied linguistics, minoritized students/early-career professionals face challenges. One of those challenges can be grappling with the, at times needlessly, dense theory of the field. While working on my dissertation (Paiz, 2015), I wanted to write a theoretical piece uniting Atkinson's (2002) sociocognitive approach with identity work in the field. But I found myself stuck, quite miserably so. I just couldn't get my head around how the different parts of my theory related to one another. At the time, I was working at the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). I talked to a colleague, and she said something I "harrumphed" about: *try drawing your theory*. To me, one doesn't draw serious theory-color crayons are for kindergarteners, and I am a serious applied linguist! After a few more nights of struggle, I decided to prove my colleague wrong, to prove that you couldn't draw a theory. So, I went to the store, bought some crayons and paper, and drew my theory.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit I'm still a little "salty" about the result, but it worked. She was right; you can draw a theory. Doing so was a watershed moment for me. The entirety of my theory crystalized-how each part of my conceptual framework worked together was instantly rendered clear. As I started drawing, I began by mapping out the key components of Atkinson's sociocognitive approach on one side of the paper and the elements of identity

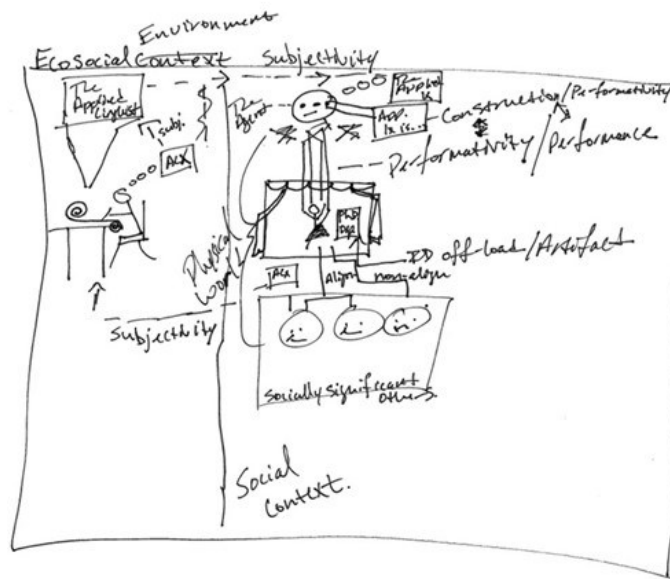
work on the other side. By drawing lines connecting related concepts, I noticed patterns and relationships that were previously obscured. The visual layout allowed me to identify overlapping areas and gaps in my understanding. For example, I realized that certain sociocognitive processes were directly influenced by identity markers, prompting deeper exploration of these intersections. This process of visual mapping turned abstract ideas into concrete connections, breaking down complexity into manageable pieces. The act of drawing made the relationships between different parts of the theory visible and tangible, transforming my disjointed thoughts into a coherent framework.

Below is an example of the visual representation that helped clarify my theory. The image illustrates how the one's professional identity is constructed and performed within the ecosocial environment. By visually mapping out components such as subjectivity, identity performance, and socially significant others, I could see how these elements interact and align, thus simplifying the conceptual complexity and enhancing my understanding. This approach, detailed in my dissertation "Toward a Sociocognitive Approach to Professional Identity and Professionalization in Applied Linguistics", enabled me to effectively articulate the dynamic interplay between sociocognitive processes and identity markers.

In the end, weeks of writer's block evaporated. I showed the draft image (image 1, above), to my dissertationsupervisor, and she said two things: (1) You really can't draw to save your

life, and (2) you must include these drawings in your dissertation because now, as a reader, I get what you're trying to do.

So, when in doubt, draw it out...I guess.



## References

- Burger, C. E. (2018). *Underrepresented minority doctoral stem students, attrition, and persistence: a comparative descriptive study* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation] Capella University, Minneapolis.
- Garrett, F. J. (2022). *Persistence in Doctoral Education: Experiences of First-Generation African American Doctoral Students* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. University of California, San Diego.
- Paiz, J. M. (2015). *Toward a Sociocognitive Approach to Professional Identity and Professionalization in Applied Linguistics* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. Purdue University, West Lafayette.
- Titus, M. A. (2006). Understanding college degree completion of students with low socioeconomic status: The influence of the institutional financial context. *Research in Higher Education*, 47, 371-398.



Dr. J. M. Paiz is a Teaching Assistant Professor within the English for Academic Purposes Program at George Washington University. They hold a doctorate in Teaching English as a Second Language (Purdue), as well as graduate certificates in Computer Sciences (GW) and Teaching Writing (The University of Toledo). Ever the lifelong learner, Dr. Paiz also possesses professional certifications in Data Analytics, Language Program Management, and Blended Teaching/Learning. Their research primarily focuses on the intersection of machine learning, natural language processing, and artificial intelligence in English language teaching, in addition to fostering more inclusive pedagogical approaches for gender and sexual minorities in English language classrooms.