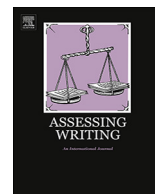




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Book review

T. Saenkhum *Decisions, Agency, and Advising: Key Issues in the Placement of Multilingual Writers into First-Year Composition Courses* Utah State University Press, Logan, UT (2016) 153, ISBN: 978-1-60732-540-6.

Tanita Saenkhum's *Decisions, Agency, and Advising: Key Issues in the Placement of Multilingual Writers into First-Year Composition Courses*, serves as an invaluable resource for all writing program administrators (WPAs), educators, and advisors concerned about the placement needs of their diverse student populations. This timely research comes as institutions continue to refine the writing course offerings available to their multilingual students, including sections of first-year composition (FYC) specifically tailored to L2 writers, stretch course offerings, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes, Intensive English Program (IEPs) classes, etc. These institutions' placement procedures should generally reflect the curricular design of their course offerings (Weigle, 2007), and a variety of different procedures have been developed in consequence. One popular method is Directed Self-Placement (Crusan, 2006; Ferris, Evans, & Kurzer, 2016; Royer & Gilles, 1998), in which incoming students are encouraged to make informed, autonomous decisions about how they will meet their FYC and/or English course requirement. Several universities also utilize standardized test scores, writing portfolios, in-house English placement exams, or a combination of these methods (Kokhan, 2013) to place multilingual students, and much research has been dedicated to the validity and viability of these processes.

Saenkhum wades into the debate surrounding placement carefully, recognizing the benefits of each of these options without arguing for any one specifically. Her text is instead concerned about the process by which multilingual students, if given the option to select and/or challenge their placement into a writing course, make informed placement decisions. While the institution from which she recruits her participants utilizes standardized test scores to place students into honors, multilingual, mainstream, and stretch courses, Saenkhum's research is broad in scope. Through a case study of 11 multilingual writers (both international students and U.S. residents who are English Learners), Saenkhum addresses the impact of various stakeholders in creating ideal environments for multilingual students to engage in acts of agency when making such placement decisions. Ultimately, she argues that administrators must offer opportunities for students to self-assess, negotiate, plan, and question their placement decisions. While Saenkhum particularly emphasizes the perceptions of the students involved in her case study, her text is unique in that it also investigates the presuppositions and knowledge (or lack thereof) about placement held by both the students' academic advisors and instructors. Thus the results of Saenkhum's project illuminate the multifaceted, campus-wide factors that impact students' placement decisions without neglecting the individual student narratives vital to her study.

The book's first chapter immediately situates the author as a practicing educator/administrator as well as a researcher and theorist. Opening this introductory section with two brief dialogues between herself and multilingual writers, Saenkhum illustrates the confusion that often surrounds the ways that these students are assigned to a specific English composition course. The chapter then delineates the different placement methods that writing programs may utilize to place students into first year composition (FYC) courses, and Saenkhum argues that a student's agency will ultimately influence her or his acceptance of these placement decisions. The author reveals that prior conversations on student agency remain in flux; applied linguists, for example, have historically perceived agency as the result of internal or external motivations to act. Rhetoricians, however, have acknowledged agency as an act that occurs when students must make or resist a specific choice. Saenkhum offers a definition of agency that not only analyzes students' motivation to resist or accept placement, but one that also considers students' abilities to make decisions about their own capacity to write. Her operationalized definition of agency, "the capacity to act or not to act, contingent upon various conditions" serves as the book's theoretical premise. This discussion of agency is particularly salient to a case study that concerns itself with the placement of multilingual writers, for agency becomes an important critical lens for analyzing students' struggles and successes in navigating the placement process. The chapter then introduces each of the students who participated in the case study and describes briefly their linguistic and national backgrounds. The writing teachers and advisors who participated in interviews about their roles in placing students are also introduced in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, Saenkhum articulates different factors—academic advisors' recommendations, peer feedback, orientation sessions, and other experiences—that her student participants considered the most influential to their ultimate decisions to take a particular composition course. Saenkhum illuminates the critical impact of academic advisors' recommendations on students' placement choices: a discussion that is perhaps the most underrepresented of these factors in previously disseminated research. A

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narrative snapshot of student interview responses reveals that many students privilege the advice of their peers over the recommendations of any other stakeholder, while a commentary on new student orientation practices exposed that many students felt misinformed or under-informed after attending such events. Students rarely rely upon a single source when making an informed course selection, however, and these insights remain central to Saenkhum's elaboration on each of these factors mentioned above later in the book.

Saenkhum's text places student perceptions at the center of her discussion on agency, and chapters 3–5 work to explicate her students' motivations to negotiate or accept their initial placement into a first year composition course. International student Afia's responses revealed ways that students' perceptions about placement can change as they work their way through traditional composition courses. Although Afia unsuccessfully attempted to test out of one of her English courses, she reported an appreciation for her writing classes by the end of the academic year and suggested that the WPA provide more information about these courses to new students. In fact, many of the students that Saenkhum interviewed echoed this call for a greater quantity of easily accessible information about placement. Saenkhum's multiple interviews with Joel, an international student, revealed that some students consistently accept placements that do not reflect their English proficiency. In Chapter Four, Saenkhum contrasts the experiences of two students, Pascal and Jonas, in order to highlight the importance of the students' own self-assessment of their English proficiency. Recognizing that neither of these students felt satisfied with their initial placement, Saenkhum addresses the ways that FYC programs may circumscribe multilingual writers' academic development. Most significantly, WPAs need to look for new ways to account for their students' linguistic diversity by recognizing the presence of international, resident second language (L2), and generation 1.5 writers (multilingual students from US schools) in their classrooms. In consequence, Saenkhum argues that instructors of mainstream courses should not assume that their students possess native-like understandings of language or culture, while L2 writing instructors should abstain from treating their students like complete newcomers.

In Chapter Five, Saenkhum highlights the interviews of Jasim, Chan, and Ting, all multilingual writers, who exerted agency by questioning their placement options. Saenkhum devotes attention here to external factors impacting students' decisions to take a specific FYC course. For example, Chan planned to change her major from business communication to finance or accounting, and she wanted to delay her placement so that she could focus on taking the prerequisite courses for those majors. The author uses these narratives to support her overall argument that "listening to students' voices will allow us to develop, streamline, and improve placement practices that are more student-friendly and able to address their needs" (p. 76). *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* not only corroborates this claim, but it also provides critical recommendations for WPAs and others charged with placing multilingual students into composition courses. Saenkhum clearly points out that WPAs cannot possibly be aware of all of the external factors potentially influencing students' placement choices, so they must create an environment that affords students some authority to negotiate their placement.

The author's emphasis on multilingual students' perceptions of both their university's placement procedures and their individual FYC courses proves vital to the book's overall argument. However, Saenkhum's interviews with the students' academic advisors in Chapter Six offer especially novel insights for WPAs struggling to inform students about their placement options. Most notably, the advisors included in this chapter reported spending little time explaining the FYC course options to multilingual students. Shockingly, while some advisors did make students aware of the university's written placement test, others stated that they purposefully withheld information about the written placement exam (in this case College Board's Accuplacer) from students unless directly asked about it. Saenkhum's findings in this chapter testify to the need for WPAs to maintain dialogue with and provide information to students' advisors, for nearly every student listed the recommendation of their advisor as a factor that influenced their decision to accept or negotiate their placement. In Chapter Seven, the author reveals the need to involve composition instructors in the placement process as well, for the teachers' training and knowledge of the FYC courses' curriculum make them uniquely qualified to provide holistic assessments of incoming students' writing abilities.

Saenkhum concludes her book with three major recommendations for those involved in placing multilingual writers into FYC courses: 1) Writing programs should offer students several different placement options, 2) Students must be provided with easily accessible and reliable information about their placement options, and 3) Students should have the final say concerning what FYC course they ultimately select. Some readers may feel that these conclusions are too ambitious for a case study occurring at a single institution. To address this concern, I would point readers to Saenkhum's coda chapter, for it reflects the transformational nature of her research while offering insights concerning how the study's results may be applied to other institutional contexts. In relation to her university's multilingual student populations, she describes how her institution updated the online course descriptions and circulated a placement brochure in order to better inform students. The university also expanded the Assistant Director of ESL's position to include continual dialogue between the composition department and both the advising offices and the Liberal Arts and Sciences Office, and the department now distributes placement handouts to new advisors each semester. For the sake of writing teachers, conversations concerning placement are now a dynamic component of annual faculty conventions at Arizona State as well as required coursework on L2 writing. However, more concrete examples concerning how WPAs might include writing teachers in the placement process would benefit her overall argument in this section. All of these changes were "gradually implemented" (p. 117) and can be easily applied or adapted by other WPAs and composition departments.

Since the entire case study took place at one institution, however, the study exclusively analyzed the placement of undergraduate multilingual writers, although many institutions (such as my own) also have placement procedures for multilingual graduate students. Moreover, some institutions—due to size, number of multilingual students, and/or course offerings—also simply mainstream multilingual students into singular sections of FYC. While Saenkhum's text might serve as a testimony to the need to more diverse placement offerings at these institutions, the extent of its applicability might be limited for administrators in such settings. These shortcomings do not impact the reliability of Saenkhum's empirical results, but they might circumscribe the overall scope of her text's

applicable audiences.

In terms of the research detailed in *Decisions, Agency, and Advising*, a comprehensive and highly reliable coding scheme (at times reaching 80% intercoder reliability) may eliminate concerns the reader may have about the validity and applicability of Saenkhum's research. In addition, her interview questions for the students, advisors, and instructors (located in the book's appendices) are carefully constructed as to reassure the reader that the students provided authentic responses to open-ended questions. These tools themselves should serve as a benefit to researchers and administrators concerned with assessment, as very little research has been dedicated to the assessment of placement procedures of any kind. In addition, individuals involved with large-scale assessment practices such as placement may come from many departments of the university, and Saenkhum's well-crafted text and reliable data offer accessible and easily understood conclusions to anyone involved in a large-scale assessment of students in higher education.

As a graduate student specializing in L2 writing and WPA scholarship, this book has not only served as a vital resource to my training in placement practices; it has offered invaluable data concerning the internal and external motivations that impact multilingual students' capacity to exert agency. This data has specifically aided in current research on programmatic assessment more broadly, where I have expanded my consideration of different stakeholders from across the university. I would moreover encourage other graduate students in composition or its related fields to seek out this book as they prepare for an academic career that will certainly include working with, placing, and/or advocating for diverse student populations. Thus I highly recommend this book to those concerned about their college or university's diverse student populations, advising practices, or large-scale assessment procedures.

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