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Book Review

Decisions, Agency, and Advising: Key Issues in the Placement of Multilingual Writers into First-year Composition Courses, Tanita Saenkhum, Utah State University Press, Logan, UT (2016). 153 pp., Paperback: \$22.95; E-book: \$18.95.

Several volumes on the historical development of college writing in the U.S. have argued that the institution of first-year composition is quintessentially American (see, for instance, the now-classic histories of college writing in the U.S. by Berlin (1987), and Connors (1997)). That is, the idea was widely accepted of requiring all incoming college students to take a writing class, particularly for the apparent purpose of developing the writing skills needed to navigate four or more years of undergraduate study. This idea was part of the greater evolution of the American university system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a consequence, much of the scholarship on and the subsequent administrative implementation of first-year writing programs has been traditionally U.S.-centric and established on the assumption that students in first-year writing classes are monolingual English users who nonetheless still need to develop writing skills in English.

Yet, as Tanita Saenkhum aptly explains in *Decisions, Agency, and Advising: Key Issues in the Placement of Multilingual Writers into First-year Composition Courses*, an increasing number of multilingual students enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities each year has prompted first-year writing programs to adopt a more international perspective, an effort that has resulted in both progress and new challenges. The last few decades have witnessed the globalization of higher education, with U.S. universities establishing partnerships with international universities and even satellite campuses abroad, and an increasing number of international students have come to the U.S. to pursue undergraduate degrees. Even with a slowing down of this number last year, the 2017 Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange revealed that more than one million international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities for a second year in a row (Institute of International Education, 2017). Together with U.S.-resident multilingual students, international multilingual students have begun to change the face of first-year composition.

The focus of Saenkhum's book is on a problem that has ironically emerged from the efforts of writing programs to provide multilingual students more options in taking first-year writing, namely by designing first-year writing courses specifically to meet the unique needs of these students. When Saenkhum (herself an L2 writer) was a graduate teaching assistant at Arizona State University (ASU), undergraduate students had the option of taking mainstream, advanced, stretch-model, or multilingual sequences of first-year writing to fulfill their writing requirement. However, as Saenkhum soon realized, writing teachers, advisors, and multilingual students themselves were regularly uncertain about placement procedures and policies, and relying on incomplete and often incorrect information, these students were placed (or placed themselves) in writing classes that did not best fit their needs. Saenkhum's reflection on this placement problem turned into a full-fledged qualitative study, based on her doctoral dissertation, where she interviewed eleven multilingual students multiple times during an academic year at ASU as they made placement decisions and took one of the first-year writing sequences. Saenkhum presents her study in this book and offers insight into the issue of placement, highlighting the importance of *student agency* in an effective placement process. Writing program administrators and writing teachers at U.S. colleges and universities will most directly benefit from reading this book. However, educators outside of the U.S., particularly those who work in institutions that partner with U.S. institutions and who teach students intending to study in the U.S. will also find this book useful.

Saenkhum introduces the study in Chapter 1 by pointing to her own challenges advising multilingual undergraduate students about first-year writing placement. The chapter focuses on the various dynamics at play in this process, from student perceptions of first-year writing to the questionable practice of using standardized testing and timed-writing activities as placement procedures to a lack of communication among writing program administrators, writing teachers, and academic advisors. A significant part of the chapter is also devoted to defining *student agency*, which provides the theoretical framework for the study. After giving various discipline-specific definitions of agency, Saenkhum offers her own "operationalized definition," which provides the lens for the rest of her study: "Agency is the capacity to act or not to act, contingent upon various conditions" (p. 11). Indeed, these *conditions* for agency allow students to make informed decisions about placement, a theme that drives the rest of the book. The chapter then concludes with a detailed description of the research context for the study, and its methods and design.

Chapter 2 describes the various sources of information that students in the study relied on when making placement decisions: recommendations from academic advisors, opinions from friends who may or may not have already taken a first-year composition

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class, presentations in new student orientation, and online information available through the university's website. Saenkhum also uses this chapter to highlight these sources of information as having the potential to create, or obstruct, conditions in which students are able to exercise agency when making placement decisions.

In these first two chapters, Saenkhum acknowledges research that has already begun to look at multilingual writers' preferences for the kinds of writing classes they are most comfortable taking. A good body of work, for instance, shows that some multilingual students identify with ESL sections of first-year composition (Braine, 1996; Costino & Hyon, 2007) but others resist the ESL label and prefer mainstream sections (Chiang & Schmida, 1999; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). Although these preferences certainly contribute to multilingual students' decision-making when it comes to choosing a first-year writing class, Saenkhum believes that there is more to the story. While this previous work has revealed the preferences of certain groups of multilingual writers at a fixed time and fixed place and has "described [their] perceptions of placement practices in general," Saenkhum argues that a better understanding of "how the multilingual students make placement decisions" is needed (italics in the original, p. 29). For Saenkhum, figuring out this "how" lies in understanding the kinds of information made available to students, how this information complicates and even changes student preferences, and how this information creates the conditions for student agency in making decisions about placement.

The next three chapters explore specific acts of agency that Saenkhum observed in her participants as they made decisions about first-year composition. She organizes the chapters around different themes that emerged from her analysis of interviews with seven focal participants (out of eleven total for the study). Chapter 3 focuses on two U.S. permanent resident students, one from Qatar and the other from Mexico, who either *negotiated* or *accepted* placement as acts of agency. Chapter 4 highlights the importance of *self-assessment* on the part of two international students, one from Norway and the other from France, in the placement process. Chapter 5 presents the experiences of three international students (one from the United Arab Emirates and two from China) as they *questioned* initial placement in the first semester of the first-year writing sequence and, based on the experiences taking this first class, actively *planned* for the second semester. Saenkhum uses the experiences in these three chapters to show how all seven of the focal participants exercised agency to varying degrees. However, the conditions for agency were not always conducive to their making good decisions due to the amount and quality of information they received about first-year writing options. Some received very little information. Others received information from friends and academic advisors that was not always accurate. And still others felt boxed into an ESL identity by their academic advisors who insisted they take multilingual classes despite the fact that they qualified for and had a desire to take mainstream classes. Although a few of the participants ultimately found they were satisfied with their placement decisions, others regretted their decisions, having realized that they would have done things differently if more information had been available.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on academic advisors and writing teachers, respectively. As part of her qualitative approach, Saenkhum interviewed four advisors from different academic disciplines who advised some of the focal student participants and five first-year writing teachers, including graduate teaching assistants, who taught some of the focal student participants. In the chapter on advisors, Saenkhum describes the kinds of information advisors relied on when guiding students about first-year writing decisions, how they understood multilingual students, and how the focal student participants assessed their advisors after the academic year. These advisors knew about first-year writing options only from a limited number of general advising sessions, and in wanting to spend most of the advising time focusing on required courses for students' majors, appealed to arguably superficial characteristics—international status, TOEFL score, timed-writing test score, and even accent—when recommending a multilingual section of first-year writing. In the chapter on writing teachers, Saenkhum discusses the teachers' approaches to teaching multilingual writers and, with no direct communication about placement between the writing program and writing teachers, the teachers' desire to know more about the placement process. The picture that emerges in these chapters is one defined by incomplete and, at times, inaccurate information connecting three different groups on the ASU campus—advisors, writing teachers, and multilingual students—who nonetheless all wanted to understand and make good decisions about placement.

In Chapter 8, Saenkhum interprets these findings by returning to her "operationalized definition of agency" and focusing on whether or not students in the study had the "capacity to act" based on the "various conditions" that defined their experiences making placement decisions (p. 107). Saenkhum's answer is that the students in the study did exercise agency as much as they could despite a system of placement procedures built on standardized testing and timed-writing activities. The presence of other human agents—advisors, peers, and writing teachers—created the potential for negotiation and allowed the focal student participants some opportunity to make decisions (i.e., "to act") shaping and even changing their own placement outcomes. However, these conditions were neither consistent nor ideal, and Saenkhum concludes the chapter and the study by offering three recommendations for writing programs to create and maintain optimal conditions for student agency—provide as many placement options as possible; communicate accurately and readily about the different placement options; and, perhaps most significantly, allow students to make their own placement decisions. In the year following her data collection, Saenkhum began to share her findings with writing program administrators at ASU, and her suggestions became the impetus for key changes in the placement process after Saenkhum completed her study.

Saenkhum ends the book with a coda chapter, where she follows up on the suggestions she made to the ASU writing program. At the time of the follow-up in 2015, nearly four years had passed and Saenkhum was a new faculty member in the English Department at the University of Tennessee. Looking back at the research she conducted as a graduate student, she was able to trace its effect at ASU, noting how administrators were able to bring more clarity and understanding to the writing program, be more explicit about placement procedures, and involve both writing teachers and students more actively in the placement process.

Decisions, Agency, and Advising is a book that simply and practically reveals what educators and administrators who work with multilingual students in college writing contexts have known for a while now – first-year composition as an institution must move beyond its quintessentially American roots and embrace an international perspective where linguistic, cultural, and national diversity

is seen as the new normal. Saenkhum shows us that this is happening, with the writing program at ASU and others like it across the U.S., reshaping their curricula to include more options for multilingual students. Saenkhum's book also reveals that this progress brings a new challenge with placement. As an educator who has taught college writing for many years at several institutions in the U.S., at an international university in Japan, and at my current university, I experience this challenge firsthand. I also direct my university's ESL program, and I spend my days helping multilingual students navigate their way through ESL and transition to undergraduate classes. Which writing class to take is often a tricky question—but a question that comes from the fact that my university, like ASU and many others, offers more than one option of first-year writing, including a section for multilingual students. Having options in a first-year writing program is a good thing. However, as Saenkhum so importantly points out, options without clear information allowing advisors, instructors, and students themselves to make good decisions quickly complicates the placement process, a challenge I face on my own campus.

To begin to meet this challenge, particularly when it comes to placement, Saenkhum believes a first-year writing program must communicate regularly and explicitly about its options and policies and foster conditions that give its students the ability to make their own decisions. Saenkhum develops these points through a straightforward qualitative approach, and the familiar organization of the book makes it apparent that it was adapted from her doctoral dissertation. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the simplicity of its organization translates to a lack of depth or insight. Indeed, one of the key strengths of the book is that it is rooted in the work of a graduate teaching assistant who struggled to help multilingual students make placement decisions and then realized that she shared this struggle with experienced writing teachers, academic advisors, and writing program administrators. This realization prompted a research project that consequently has an almost grass-roots feel to it, a project that emerged from the necessity to solve a very real, recurring problem. All of this is not to say that the book lacks a professional tone. In fact, it is interesting to note that this book really has two authors—Saenkhum the graduate teaching assistant who began the study and Saenkhum the academic returning to the study to interpret its significance.

The result is a book that effectively complements other work focusing on the challenges multilingual students face as undergraduates and as writers, specifically, in U.S. higher education contexts. For instance, its case-study approach fits nicely alongside other case studies and edited volumes, particularly those that explore multilingual students' academic literacy acquisition (e.g., Leki, 2007; Zamel & Spack, 2003), adjustment to college (e.g., Kanno & Harklau, 2012) and adjustment to college writing, specifically (e.g., Matsuda, Cox, Jordan, & Ortmeier-Hooper, 2010; Ortmeier & Ruecker, 2016; Roberge et al., 2009). Graduate students and scholars with research interests focusing on the intersection between first-year composition and second-language writing scholarship will find that this book joins conversations already begun in these other publications but also contributes something new—a set of practical suggestions for making the placement process an effective one primarily through encouraging student agency.

The most obvious audience for *Decisions, Agency, and Advising*, however, consists of the writing program administrators and writing teachers at U.S. colleges and universities experiencing placement challenges similar to the one at ASU. Writing programs can consider Saenkhum's suggestions as they rethink their own placement procedures. They can use Saenkhum's approach to conduct an internal audit of their own placement practices to assess how well they make information about placement available, how well they communicate with writing teachers and academic advisors, and most importantly, to what degree they give multilingual students the opportunity to exercise agency. Finally, educators at institutions outside of the U.S. may also find *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* useful. Those who administer and teach in U.S.-style writing programs can use the book as a model for self-assessment. Those who are unfamiliar with U.S.-style writing programs will find Saenkhum's description of the writing program at ASU and the different first-year writing sequence options informative. In addition, educators who advise and teach students planning to study in the U.S. can constructively use the book's themes in advising sessions and even in their teaching, to encourage students to be active, to ask questions, and to take control of their own learning as much as they can.

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