

Review

Viewing Directed Self-Placement  
Through a Multilingual, Multicultural,  
Transdisciplinary, and Ethical Lens

Marie Webb

Saengkhum, Tanita. *Decisions, Agency, and Advising: Key Issues in The Placement of Multilingual Writers*. UP of Colorado / Utah State UP, 2016. Available in ebook, PDF, and paperback editions. 168 pages.

In 2001, the CCCC *Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers* was released; it was revised in 2009 and reaffirmed in 2014. The newest additions to the statement address the placement of multilingual students in first-year composition (FYC) with a specific section supporting directed self-placement (DSP). Even with substantial calls in the past two decades to address the needs of multilingual writers, at many institutions little has changed with regard to placement of multilingual writers. *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* by Tanita Saengkhum addresses the 2009 CCCC position statement and fills a void in empirical research by offering a microanalysis of seven multilingual writers' FYC placement experiences at Arizona State University (ASU). Saengkhum focuses on students' perspectives, which are often neglected in placement research.

The book is intended for first-year English (FYE) directors and writing across the curriculum (WAC) directors who are curious to learn more about modified DSP. Teachers of all disciplines who have little knowledge or training about the diverse backgrounds and identities of multilingual writers will also want to read Saengkhum's piece. Many writing program administrators (WPAs) "find themselves in unfamiliar territory when it comes to assessment work," and they may have even more unfamiliarity with anti-racist and ethical placement agendas (167). Extending Miller's argument,

many WPAs and writing instructors do not have sufficient understanding of assessment and placement of multilingual writers. *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* explicitly addresses the 2009 Second Language Writing (SLW) statement's call for instructors who are sensitive to the needs of multilingual writers. The statement reads:

Any writing course, including basic writing, first-year composition, advanced writing, and professional writing, as well as any writing-intensive course that enrolls any second language writers should be taught by an instructor who is able to identify and is prepared to address the linguistic and cultural needs of second language writers.

Saengkhum extends the SLW Statement's call for teacher preparation to not only writing instructors and WPAs, but also to placement advisors. Interviews demonstrated that most ASU placement advisors were not prepared to address the rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds of multilingual advisees.

Therefore, *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* is one of the most current resources for advisors, WPAs, and teachers who need additional training working with multilingual students. The book is also one of the first extensive, qualitative documentations of DSP's viability among multilingual writers. The 2009 SLW Position Statement states that writing programs need to provide resources for teachers who are working with second language writers, and that teachers also need encouragement and incentives for additional training. Saengkhum's book is a resource that teachers and WPAs can be excited about; there is no longer an expansive gap in research surrounding the effectiveness of DSP among multilingual students.

Additionally, the 2009 SLW Statement recognizes the need for long-term support via WAC and graduate student writing support. Although no graduate students were interviewed, multilingual students in the study reported wanting further writing support after FYC. Furthermore, a host of unique questions about writing support are raised concerning students entering or returning to the U.S. from other undergraduate and graduate level programs with English medium instruction. One student in the study graduated from an English medium high school in Dubai, Jasim. He is a proficient speaker of Arabic and English, and received an A+ in multilingual composition. Struggling to maintain enthusiasm for the course, Jasim perceived his classmates as being unmotivated and the course as fairly easy (66). He might have had more satisfaction in a non-multilingual writing course; he mentioned that he was considering a mainstream second-semester FYE course. Yet, as Saengkhum noted in her interview with him, Jasim believed international students could take only the multilingual sec-

tion of composition in their first semester (66). Jasim's case represents a nuanced perspective of the challenges that multilingual writers from English medium international high schools face in the United States.

Several important reviews of the literature on multilingual writers are highlighted in Chapter One. For readers who may be unfamiliar with ethical terminology for multilingual students, Saenkhum provides a detailed list of resources and reasons to support using the term multilingual to describe the diversity of her participants, who include United States citizens, permanent United States residents, and international visa students.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter one frames the book around Saenkhum's prior experiences as a graduate teaching assistant at ASU who knew very little about the placement processes of her multilingual student writers. The study grew out of her teaching experiences as she discovered that her students also knew very little about why they were taking a particular writing course. Seeking to fix the problem of a lack of shared knowledge among multilingual students and teachers regarding writing placement, Saenkhum traveled back to ASU to conduct the study after receiving a tenure-track position at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Seven student placement experiences are presented via detailed portraits in which direct quotes are utilized. Saenkhum shifts between descriptive content and quotes with her analytical discussion because she wants the voices of multilingual writers in her study to prevail (25). Each portrait spans a period of time over one year and captures student's experiences before, during and after placement. Not only does Saenkhum intertwine her critique and discussion with direct quotes from students, but she also provides a section at the end of each portrait outlining students' recommendations for placement changes.

For readers who may be unfamiliar with placement methods involving student agency, Saenkhum consolidates placement processes into two categories in chapter one: methods that "interfere" with student agency such as standardized test scores, timed writing samples, and portfolios (unless students retake tests or have a placement choice offered to them) and methods that "are designed to maximize student agency" such as DSP and the Writers Profile (16). Royer and Gilles' founding philosophy of DSP is that students have the ability to take an active role in selecting FYC courses. Therefore, it is ethical to honor student's autonomy, as they often know far more about their writing experiences and needs than administrators.

Student agency is realized when students act on their own terms and beliefs about their writing. A drastic departure from traditional placement requires a change in attitude among placement committees and requires students to think critically about their writing experiences and skills in relation to specific course offerings (61). Saenkhum describes her theory

of agency in chapter two as "acts of agency" comprised of five conditions: entailing students' negotiation of placement, choosing to accept or deny an original placement decision, self-assessment of proficiency upon choosing a writing course, questioning placement, and planning for placement (37).

Chapter three presents detailed portraits of two students' placement experiences with the ultimate argument that more detailed placement information better equips students to "exercise agency" (40). One of the major findings in chapter three reveals that a type of modified directed self-placement option that still incorporates the use of standardized test scores can be very promising for large universities. At the time of the study, ASU was using test scores to help guide students with placement options while highlighting a student's freedom to make the final placement decision. Students were able to take another placement test if they were not happy with their previous test scores, and the alternative was to be provided to students by advisors.

The modified DSP option at ASU seems to have worked successfully in Saenkhum's accounts because of the combination of test scores and self-assessment practices as compared to a recent online, pilot DSP project at large university in California. Ferris, Evans, and Kurzer report that multilingual writers voices may play a role in placement, but that self-assessment alone is not enough for accurate placement into a complex sequence of four courses (1). Several students interviewed in Saenkhum's study believed they made successful placement decisions based upon not only their test scores, but also other information provided to them by the program, advisors, friends, and family. The major differences between both studies are the humanistic and nuanced reports from Saenkhum in addition to her consideration of student's long-term success rather than a comparison of students' initial self-assessment questionnaires and test scores.

However, not all students felt so positively about the modified DSP system. In chapter four, Saenkhum presents portraits of two students who were less satisfied with their placement decisions, and therefore she argues that self-assessing as a crucial aspect of placement. One of the students in chapter four, Pascal, claimed that his advisor had told him that taking multilingual composition would help him avoid extra work (53). Saenkhum highlights that Pascal and another student named Jonas both did not receive accurate information from placement advisors.

Regardless of their positive or negative placement experiences, students reported a desire for additional placement information. During an interview, two students explained to Saenkhum that the university should have provided models of writing assignments. The students also wanted to see more details about activities and assignments in each course level.

Several students discussed in chapters three and four also noted that they were unaware that they had a choice in their placement decision, which Saenkhum explains was a major program failure as the program had intended for them to have a choice.

Chapter five provides evidence of students' second-semester placement decisions as being heavily influenced by other outside factors. Students' exercised agency by questioning various second-semester placement options, and by planning whether or not to postpone a multilingual second-semester placement course. The key finding in chapter five is that students had an "emerging condition" such as a change in major or decision to transfer to another institution that initiated what they deemed as a successful negotiation of placement.

After discussing the nuances of students in her study, Saenkhum moves on to discuss her interviews with advisors in the program in chapter six. One of the major findings of the study is that students are heavily influenced by academic advisors' recommendations and that academic advisors were the worst source of quality placement information (37). If academic advisors were not clear that students had a placement choice, then students lacked agency. Saenkhum defines *acts of agency* as the ability for students to negotiate placement, make an informed choice to accept or deny placement (being aware that they have a choice), self-assess in relation to a course, question placement, or plan for placement (37). For example, Jasim reported that he wished his advisor had been clearer after finding out from Saenkhum during an interview that he should have been given a choice in his course placement. Not receiving accurate and informed placement information from advisors was an additional major finding that was confirmed with interviews from advisors. Some advisors focused more on discussing courses required for students' majors rather than English placement. Saenkhum explains that while some advisors were generally concerned with students' understanding of the English placement process and the many placement options available, most advisors needed more training on working with multilingual students; she discovered that advisors falsely viewed multilingual students as international visa students via their accents or TOEFL scores, and such views may have led to less satisfactory advising (78–79).

In chapters seven and eight, Saenkhum provides recommendations for writing teachers' roles in placement as well as practical recommendations regarding the role of student agency in placement decisions. Saenkhum's final recommendation is for writing instructors to have more training and involvement in student placement. Her recommendation aligns with the advice and experiences of students in the study. My only critique of the methodology is that future researchers may be wise to observe academic

advisors during their placement conversations with students and obtain e-mail or recorded phone conversations for further data analysis and validity. Saenkhum offers some short comparisons among advisors and teachers perspectives with student experiences in chapters six through eight, but she solely relies on reported information.

For researchers seeking to operationalize the variable of student agency, Saenkhum's detailed description of her coding process in appendix C is relevant to scholars in many fields. Saenkhum establishes her own credibility as well as the study's reliability by providing examples of codes that were combined and collapsed. She also shared coding negotiations that took place with her trained coding partner. In addition, Saenkhum outlines the failures of her original coding process that ultimately led to well-justified coding changes for successful operationalization of student agency. Additional tools are the interview guides for students, writing teachers, and academic advisors provided in appendix B.

One of the most interesting recommendations Saenkhum makes is for required L2 writing courses. I feel her statement on teacher training seems like a hidden treasure in the book. She states that programs "in rhetoric and composition, applied linguistics, and TESOL, among others, should offer a course in teaching L2 writing and make it a requirement for graduate students" (62–63). There will likely be substantial changes in program evaluation and placement in coming years as a result of the nuanced findings presented in Saenkhum's work, but changes can and should take place in the realm of writing teacher education.

Although it is not an explicitly stated intention of the book, there are also connections between Saenkhum's focus on student agency that strike a very similar resemblance to discussions among current writing transfer theorists and researchers. One of the major tenants of DSP is to help foster and utilize students' self-efficacy for long-term academic success. Similarly, one of the major influences of writing transfer success stories is a student's self-efficacy. Driscoll and Wells write about the important role of the individual for long-term writing success (9). Wells found that students with a positive self-efficacy were able to write with persistence in various unfamiliar genres (165). Some of the students interviewed in Saenkhum's book show powerful examples of how promoting student self-efficacy starting directly during the placement process can lead to positive experiences with writing placement. Perhaps future FYC researchers should pay critical attention to how DSP may impact writing transfer among their students.

As the field of second language writing (SLW) continues to grow, it is clear that writing teachers are more frequently engaged with transdisciplinary work. Paul Kei Matsuda characterized the field of SLW as being

transdisciplinary because the field “transcends various disciplinary and institutional structures addressing issues surrounding second language writing and writers” (448). *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* is one recent example of a transdisciplinary study concerning the long-term effects of student writing placement. Writing teachers, FYC directors, writing program administrators, and professors alike in a variety of educational contexts and disciplines will benefit from having read this well-crafted, empirically informed book.

#### NOTE

1. I use the term multilingual because it most accurately represents the diversity and fluidity of identities among multicultural, multilingual, and multidialectal students.

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**Marie Webb** is a doctoral candidate in English composition and applied linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and is interested in writing teacher identity in composition and TESOL. She has been teaching since 2010 in a wide range of settings including California community colleges and universities and has international teaching experience in Seoul, South Korea, Tokyo, Japan, and Macau, China. In addition to her English language and writing teaching, Marie has also taught Master’s level coursework at the University of San Diego’s Master of Education in TESOL program and teaches online TESOL education courses at Anaheim University.



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