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Author

di Gennaro, Kristen

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Recommendations or choices? A review of Decisions, Agency, and Advising

by Kristen di Gennaro, Pace University

Saenkhum, T. (2016). *Decisions, agency, and advising: Key issues in the placement of multilingual writers into first-year composition courses*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Shortly after the publication of Tanita Saenkhum's (2016) book, *Decisions, Agency, and Advising: Key Issues in the Placement of Multilingual Writers into First-Year Composition Courses*, the California State University system announced its plans to abandon using an internal English placement test in favor of multiple external and indirect measures of writing—such as students' high school grades, grade point averages, and SAT/ACT scores—to recommend students' placement into English courses. While the use of external, indirect measures in lieu of locally-designed, direct writing assessments may be cost-effective and efficient for university administration (Crusan, 2002), such practices illustrate a recurring controversy in writing assessment (Hamp-Lyons, 2005, 2011) as they clash with guidelines for best practices in writing placement (O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009; Weigle, 2002). Empirical studies examining the impact of using external measures for placement into college writing programs reveal disadvantages to multilingual writers in particular (Fox, 2005, 2009; Kokhan, 2012, 2013). Saenkhum's book, *Decisions, Agency, and Advising*, is thus timely in that it illustrates how even when placement decisions rely initially on scores from external standardized tests, students can, and should, be given opportunities to influence their placement results. More specifically, Saenkhum's exploration into the role of agency in placement decisions for multilingual students provides suggestions for how to offset potential disadvantages introduced by changes to writing placement procedures similar to those recently adopted by the California State University system.

Presented as a year-long qualitative study of 11 multilingual students and 5 writing teachers in an effort to determine how students' agency influenced their placement decisions and outcomes, Saenkhum's book is primarily descriptive, narrated through the participants' voices. This method fits well with the initial question motivating the study: How are placement decisions made for multilingual students? Saenkhum's experience and concerns will likely resonate with many writing instructors, academic advisors, and writing program administrators, especially those in programs that include a variety of placement options, such as developmental writing, first-year writing, and/or sections specifically created for multilingual students. Indeed, scholars in second language writing studies have been grappling with questions about placement for multilingual students in various contexts for decades (e.g., Braine, 1996; Costino & Hyon, 2007; Fox, 2005; Reid, 1997; Silva, 1994; Slager, 1956).

In Chapter 1, after a brief overview of commonly used placement procedures (e.g., the use of standardized test scores, timed writing samples, portfolios, and directed self-placement) and a review of previous studies examining multilingual students' placement preferences, Saenkhum provides an operational definition of *agency* as “the capacity to act or not to act, contingent upon various conditions,” and notes student agency “can help improve placement practices” (p. 11). Describing the project as an “interview-based qualitative study” over a single academic year, the author provides details about the study's context, methods, and research questions. The study took place at “one of the largest writing programs in the country” (p. 17), enrolling more than 8,000 students in both mainstream and multilingual first-year composition tracks. In the mainstream track, students could take the two required writing courses (ENG 101 and ENG 102), a stretch course (WAC 101) extending ENG 101 into two semesters, or a single advanced composition course (ENG 105) in place of both ENG 101 and ENG 102. The multilingual track offered two courses equivalent to ENG 101 and ENG 102 (reabeled ENG 107 and ENG 108), as well as a stretch course (WAC 107) similar to WAC 101 in the mainstream track. Students were placed into writing courses based on scores from externally administered standardized tests (SAT, ACT, TOEFL, and IELTS) or a locally administered version of the ACCUPLACER test. Students learned about their placement options from their academic advisors during new student orientation sessions the summer before their first semester. Saenkhum's research questions aimed to discover a) how multilingual writers make decisions about placement into mainstream or multilingual courses, b) how they exercise agency in this process, c) what role academic advisors and writing teachers can play in the placement decision process, and d) what changes can be made to maximize student agency in the placement process.

Chapter 2 is presented as “the central part of the book [as] it leads to a discussion of how the multilingual students exercise agency in their placement decisions” (p. 29). It provides an overview of second language writing research and identifies the various sources of placement information and options available to (or in some cases, unintentionally withheld from) students, such as the option to use ACT English scores for placement into an advanced composition course, or to take the ACCUPLACER test to be considered for a different placement. The students described in the study seemed to have been simply informed of their placement and were not encouraged to choose among a set of options, nor were they provided with options in most cases; as a result, readers may be a little confused here and throughout the book by Saenkhum's use of the words “choice” and “decision” in reference to students' placement. That is, rather than enacting choices or decisions, students in the study seemed to be accepting or challenging their placement results.

Chapter 3 shares interview data from two students, both placed into a multilingual developmental writing course based on their standardized test scores. While one student accepted his placement recommendation without question, the other complained about

her placement when meeting with her advisor, and thus learned about the ACCUPLACER test option as a means to challenge her original placement. Initially praising the ACCUPLACER test option for allowing her to start the first-year multilingual course without taking the developmental course, the student later criticized the test as an inadequate measure of her writing ability, and she ultimately regretted not having accepted the original recommendation into the developmental writing course. I would have liked to see Saenkhum reconcile the book's promotion of student agency with this student's negative experience as a result of her having exercised agency. This student's case leaves the reader to wonder about additional situations in which students might regret being granted decision-making power for high-stakes scenarios.

Chapter 4 focuses on the experiences of two international multilingual students whose dissatisfaction with their original placement recommendations led them to "self-assess" their writing abilities with regard to the placement courses offered. One student, who was placed into the multilingual developmental writing course, actively sought additional information to challenge his placement, leading him to eventually learn about the ACCUPLACER test option from the school's website and other students. Based on his ACCUPLACER test scores, this student was able to change his placement from the developmental to the first-year course, remaining in the multilingual track. The second student placed into the multilingual first-year course but believed he should have placed into a mainstream course. Rather than challenge his placement, however, he accepted it but remained resistant to the ESL label attached to the multilingual track as this label did not correspond to his self-identification. Information from this chapter adds to the existing and insightful literature drawing attention to the influence of students' self-identification as ESL or non-ESL on their placement preferences (see Braine, 1996; Chiang and Schmida, 1999; Costino and Hyon, 2007; Harklau, 2000). Saenkhum closes this chapter by reiterating Silva's (1994) recommendation that *all* composition instructors—whether they teach mainstream or multilingual sections of writing courses—receive extensive training relevant to teaching linguistically diverse students, a situation that would then give students such as the two described in this chapter a greater variety of placement options as students would not be confined to or identified with needing multilingual sections in order to benefit from instructors knowledgeable of second language acquisition processes and current approaches for teaching multilingual writers. Given the increasing heterogeneity of college composition's student population (de Kleine & Lawton, 2015; di Gennaro, 2012), Silva's call for composition and rhetoric programs to offer, if not require, future writing instructors to take coursework on multilingual writing instruction and assessment is as relevant now as it was more than two decades ago.

Shifting from initial placement to second-semester course decisions, Chapter 5 illustrates how three students were able to "plan for and question placement when they obtained sufficient placement information from different sources" (p. 64). While the focus on second-semester choices (and not initial placement) may seem incongruent with the focus of the book, this chapter addresses an aspect of placement typically overlooked; that is, how students' self-identification as multilingual (or not) influences their decisions to remain in, leave, or enter a multilingual course sequence after their first semester. Not surprisingly, Saenkhum finds that students who had already completed a semester had greater access to information (e.g., from advisors, peers, instructors, department chairs) than incoming students, which increased their agency in deciding to continue in a multilingual composition track or move to mainstream courses. Continuing students' decisions to remain in a multilingual track or to transfer to a mainstream track highlight an under-researched phenomenon. This chapter points to the need for empirical research on these decisions and outcomes.

The critical role of academic advisors, rarely discussed in the literature on multilingual writing placement, is the subject of Chapter 6, and thus provides a new lens through which to examine the placement process. As the individuals primarily responsible for communicating placement decisions and options to students, academic advisors "were the most influential source of placement information" (p. 77) in this study, yet they were also identified as the least helpful source (see Chapter 2), potentially due to a general lack of communication, first from the writing program to academic advisors, and then from the advisors to students. Advisors also viewed placement options in binary terms, placing students with international test scores into multilingual sections and students with SAT/ACT scores into mainstream composition courses, ignoring the possibility that international students may not need or prefer multilingual courses while long-term US residents may still identify as multilingual learners and benefit from the multilingual track. Such lack of awareness limited advisors' ability to draw on students' self-identification in making appropriate placement recommendations.

Chapter 7 highlights another gap in communication, in this case between writing teachers and those involved in the placement process. The excerpts from the five writing teachers included in this study reveal that teachers often wish to know more about all issues related to placement, including what it is and who makes placement decisions. As Saenkhum notes, and many readers will likely confirm, writing teachers' confusion about the placement process can easily be mitigated if the teachers are more directly involved in the placement process.

In the final chapter, Saenkhum interprets her findings as showing that, despite not being built into the placement process, student agency still played a role in students' placement outcomes. Some readers may be disappointed that Saenkhum does not directly address problems associated with using external standardized test scores for placement into local writing courses. While this oversight may seem at odds with her promotion of student agency in the placement process, she very skillfully manages to frame this apparent contradiction into her argument: Even placement methods that rely on external standardized test scores can draw on student agency provided certain conditions are met, namely that students have access to crucial sources of information and that they be granted the freedom to choose their writing courses. The book ends with a useful coda listing changes to the program that

was the focus of the study, and appendices including the study's data collection instruments and coding procedures.

While not new, recommendations based on Saenkhum's findings are worth repeating, as they may be forgotten when new placement procedures are proposed or when a new WPA is assigned to placement. Specifically, Saenkhum notes that information about how placement is determined should be available to all stakeholders (including students, advisors, and teachers); placement processes should acknowledge the heterogeneity of multilingual learners by allowing for distinctions between international and long-term resident multilingual students; programs serving large numbers of multilingual students should offer sections taught by faculty specialized in writing instruction for multilingual learners; and all students should be provided with the knowledge, available options, and the overall ability to make their own placement decisions.

Empirical research in the field of placement testing for multilingual students into college writing programs tends toward quantitative methods and data analyses (e.g., di Gennaro, 2009; Ferris, Evans, & Kurzer, 2017; Fox, 2005, 2009; Kokhan, 2012, 2013), accompanied by discussions of technical concepts such as validity and reliability (though see O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009, for a counter-example to this trend). Readers and researchers who prefer qualitative approaches will appreciate Saenkhum's methods and data. Even readers more comfortable with quantitative methods should find the book's incorporation of participants' voices (from students, advisors, and instructors) valuable for providing insight into what works and what doesn't in terms of first-year writing placement for multilingual students. Readers will note that Saenkhum's goal is not to radically transform placement procedures, but instead to suggest ways in which student agency can be integrated into existing placement procedures. Consequently, readers looking to make relatively small yet potentially profound adjustments to an existing system will find valuable ideas that should be easy to implement in many contexts.

This book is a timely addition to conversations about writing placement for multilingual learners in US higher education. While writing placement specialists typically object to relying exclusively on external standardized test scores for writing placement purposes for a variety of reasons (e.g., Crusan, 2010; di Gennaro, 2006, 2017; Hamp-Lyons, 2005; Weigle, 2002), and findings from empirical studies of multilingual learners support these objections (Fox, 2005, 2009; Kokhan, 2012, 2013) such objections are often ignored or considered irrelevant by administrators. Rather than offer yet another argument against such test uses, Saenkhum proposes complementing standardized test scores with increased student agency, and her book provides an effective case study and materials illustrating how such integration can be implemented. Those looking to change their writing program's placement processes, or those who find themselves in situations like the one created by California State University's decision to change their placement procedures, can look to *Decisions, Agency, and Advising* for ways to build student decision-making power into systems relying on the use of external, standardized test scores for placing students into writing courses.

Kristen di Gennaro is an Assistant Professor of English and the Director of Composition at Pace University's New York City campus. Her research focuses on second language writing and writers, sociolinguistic aspects of writing, and writing-about-writing approaches to teaching composition. Her work has appeared in *Assessing Writing*, *Language Testing*, *Writing & Pedagogy*, and *Journal of Basic Writing*.

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