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Author

Minor, Denise E.

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Team Teaching Beginning Spanish at a University: A Democratic Model

DENISE E. MINOR

California State University, Chico
E-mail: dminor@csuchico.edu

This study centers on a pilot project conducted at a research university to develop a democratic team teaching model for beginning language classes. The goals of the project were to design a solid model for delivery of the daily class material by two different instructors and to measure satisfaction with the model on the part of students and instructors. Written and oral evaluations by students showed a high level of satisfaction because of the exposure to two different accents, teaching styles and types of cultural presentations. Students also said they liked having the benefit of the different strengths of the two teachers. The instructors expressed high satisfaction because of the experience of collaboration, the greater amount of time that could be dedicated to each class preparation and the reduced amount of time spent in commuting to work.

INTRODUCTION

Team teaching is a term increasingly heard in education circles as of late, yet different educators understand it to mean different things. Often it refers to a *democratic model*, also referred to as a *coordinated model* employed by many elementary school teachers who evenly split the responsibility for one class (Davis, 1995; Buckley, 2000). This is also the term used for team teaching in which college and university instructors pair up to teach an interdisciplinary course with each delivering the curriculum in his or her own area of expertise. Another common model is the *hierarchical* or *authority directed* model in which one instructor is the professor of record (or the mentor) and the other is the teaching assistant (Davis, 1995; Buckley, 2000). Beginning language courses at universities are sometimes taught by two instructors, but they almost always follow the hierarchical model in which a professor teaches half of the instructional days and oversees an assistant (usually a graduate student) who teaches the remaining classes. Walz (1992) has published a summary some of the considerable amount of research that has been conducted on both the training of the teaching assistants for university language courses and the team teaching models that have been employed at various universities. However, little research has been done in the field of Second Language Acquisition on the employment of the democratic team teaching model in beginning language courses. The present study follows the development and implementation of such a model and measures the satisfaction of both instructors and students at the end of two quarters of team teaching a total of two beginning Spanish courses.

Team Teaching at the University Level

Since the 1960's professors from various disciplines have made sojourns into experiments with team teaching with varied results. The impetus came from the desire to avoid teacher isolation, to empower teachers, and to encourage innovation (Friedman, 1997). Some of the first attempts were not successful and their failure was attributed to numerous causes, including the lack of administrative support. In terms of the instructors who participated many realized that they actually

preferred autonomy in running their classes or that they did not have the extra time to invest in coordinating a team teaching effort (Buckley, 2000). Despite these initial problems the number of instructors that are collaborating to teach college courses is increasing and many of them have found the experience rewarding. Harris and Harvey (2000) are among the latter and wrote an article documenting their experience. They maintain that they benefited as much as their students from the team teaching of an evening class for adults. Harris and Harvey wrote “we’ve been socialized to think of ourselves as the single authority” yet by team teaching they learned to “share power and space” (30). In addition, students can benefit greatly from the expertise and strengths of both teachers because “team teaching within a discipline exposes a teacher’s specific talents to at least twice as many students as in a conventional schedule” (Buckley, 2000). He further states that teaching teams comprised of instructors of different genders, ethnicity, and backgrounds often contribute greatly to the quality of the class experience as it is perceived by the students because the contrast of viewpoints engendered by such differences between instructors encourages more independent thinking and active participation.

In the area of higher education, considerable research has been conducted to evaluate a variety of democratic and hierarchical team teaching models, including those involving a core foundation course, adult education, graduate level seminars, and teacher training programs. Hinton and Downing (1996) teamed to teach a core foundation course on education and society. From the beginning they were determined to collaborate in all class planning and to avoid what they termed *turn teaching* as opposed to *team teaching*. They used the term *turn teaching* to refer to instruction that divides a class into two separate parts with little communication between instructors. *Team teaching*, on the other hand, involves constant coordination between two instructors to deliver a unified curriculum. Both student evaluations and instructor evaluations rated the experience as very positive. In particular, all involved found that the areas of individual strengths of the instructors were maximized. Also, Hinton and Downing (1996) maintained that their students benefited from the fact that they represented different racial and gender backgrounds as this contributed to bringing different perspectives into their lectures on education. George and Davis-Wiley (2000) rated the experience of team teaching a graduate level education seminar as highly rewarding because they benefited from feeling like a team, they learned to compromise and they learned new teaching techniques from each other. Another study conducted by McEwan, Field, and Kawamoto (1997) teamed experienced teachers with graduate students in an education department to collaborate in the instruction of elementary school classes. Although the project was rated as positive overall, problems arose because of the ambiguity of roles and because of situations in which the experienced teacher wanted to assert control (McEwan, Field & Kawamoto, 1997).

Interdisciplinary team teaching has been employed in a wide range of fields. Shibley (2006) studied four different teams that paired to teach: 1) science and philosophy; 2) science and kinesiology; 3) chemistry, biology and English; and 4) chemistry and biology. Although the experience proved to be positive for the majority of the participants, one team did end up disbanding because the negotiation of differences required too much time. Shibley’s principal conclusions were that teachers involved in a team must clearly define roles before beginning the endeavor and must set aside ample time to design the course and the curriculum.

At community colleges, many instructors are pairing to teach a wide variety of inter-disciplinary classes. Abell (1999) investigated interdisciplinary collaborative models at five community colleges that paired instructors to teach philosophy and American Literature, applied nursing and technical

writing, physics and English, health care ethics/nursing and English and visual, verbal and performing arts. The evaluations by instructors and students were for the most part positive. Abell (1999) did find, however, that some faculty found the team-teaching approach too time consuming and that some of the classes were not transferable to a four-year college.

In the area of the study of second languages, little research has been conducted on team teaching. However, considerable research has pointed to the benefits of exposing beginning language students to a variety of accents, something which is a natural consequence of most teaching teams. The factors of familiarity and the degree of exposure to different accents have been shown to contribute greatly to listening comprehension skills (Flowerdew, 1994). Tauroza and Luk (1997) have shown that familiarity with a foreign accent is a main factor contributing to the development of listening comprehension, more so than similarity to one's own non-native accent. Logic would hold that exposure to two different accents from two different instructors would contribute even further to the development of listening comprehension. Exposure of students to different accents, teaching styles, types of expertise and cultural information were some of the potential benefits I could imagine in a well-designed and executed team teaching model for a beginning language class.

Model Development

With these factors in mind, in the Fall of 2005 I proposed the formation of a team teaching model that would pair two graduate student instructors from different regions of the world to collaborate on the teaching of *two* separate Spanish II classes. One teacher, Laura, had moved to the United States from Venezuela as an adult. The other teacher, Steven, identified himself as Mexican-American. He had been born in the United States to Mexican parents and had been raised speaking Spanish in his family. Each teacher would be the instructor of record for one of the classes and therefore would be in charge of class administration and grading for that group of students. However, the two instructors would divide instructional days in half and, therefore, on some days they would teach the same lesson plan to two different classes and on other days they would not come to campus at all. This last issue - not coming to campus on some days - was of particular relevance to these two instructors. Both Laura and Steven drove between one and one-and-a-half hours each way to campus every day, sometimes in order to teach only one class. They had found themselves among the growing numbers of "freeway fliers," college instructors that spend numerous hours commuting in order to work in higher education (Mydans, 1995).

With the implementation of this model, I anticipated the following benefits:

- The collaboration would improve the presentation of classroom material.
- The students would benefit from interaction in the L2 with two instructors who had two different teaching styles and two different accents.
- The instructors would have more time to dedicate to each lesson plan because they would be delivering half the number of classes.
- There would be a significant increase in job satisfaction for these two instructors because their time spent on the freeway would be cut in half.

Crucial to the success of the collaboration was the fact that both teachers had had many years of

cultural presentations and as input to accompany communicative activities.

Laura was also adept at the use of technology in an L2 classroom, but from my observations during the Fall 2005 quarter, it was clear to me that her area of true expertise was the implementation of the Communicative Approach. Using games, interactive activities, and conversation prompts, Laura constantly created situations in which her students were interacting in Spanish. At least once, and often twice, per class she took her students to a place that I call “the zone,” a situation in which they forgot that language acquisition was the goal and instead strove to get their point across in the only medium permitted in class – Spanish. For example, in a lesson focused on communicating about childhood experiences Laura gave each student little packets of cards with verbs and drawings on them. They all stood up and began interacting, choosing the cards that most interested them and asking one another whether they used to do things such as dress up on Halloween, fight with their siblings, or have big birthday parties.

Evaluation

During the Fall quarter of 2005 as the assistant to the supervisor in charge of all beginning Spanish courses, I had twice observed both instructors teach Spanish I, once in person and once from a videotape of their classes. Therefore, before launching the pilot of the team teaching model, I was knowledgeable of their teaching styles, a fact which both facilitated design of the project and evaluation of its success. In terms of evaluating the success of the team teaching model, I employed four paradigms: classroom observations, student interviews, student questionnaires and interviews with the instructors. During the Winter 2006 and Spring 2006 quarters I observed Steven and Laura teaching the two courses with the Team Teaching model. I conducted mid-quarter interviews with their students and at the end of the semester I collected the questionnaires and written evaluations by the classes. At the end of the Spring 2006 quarter I interviewed both instructors and asked them to compare teaching alone with teaching as part of a team in terms of job satisfaction.

The first evaluation of student opinions took place in the middle of the quarter. For both courses, I arrived 15 minutes before class ended and, after the instructors left, asked the students what they thought of the team teaching approach in general and their team teachers in particular. Most of the comments were very positive, although in both classes there was a student who said that having two teachers was confusing.

In the students’ written evaluation at the end of the quarter, they were asked to respond to the following statements by choosing: *Strongly agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree or Strongly Disagree*. The statements were:

1. The Team Teaching approach is a good model for delivering the course content of Spanish 2. (Good model?)
2. This team of teachers was well organized and appeared to communicate adequately so as not to overlap in presentation of material. (Communication better?)
3. Having two teachers was beneficial because I was exposed to two different accents and two different ways of using Spanish. (Accent variety?)
4. Having two teachers was beneficial because I had greater exposure to a variety of cultural presentations and learned different kinds of cultural knowledge from them. (Cultural

variety?)

5. I believe it was better to learn Spanish from two teachers this quarter than it would have been to learn Spanish from one teacher. (Preferred model?)

The following graph represents the percentages of students that answered “Strongly Agree,” “Agree” or “Somewhat Agree” to the statements. As is seen below, the students’ evaluations were mostly positive, particularly in the second quarter after the instructors were able to improve their team teaching model.

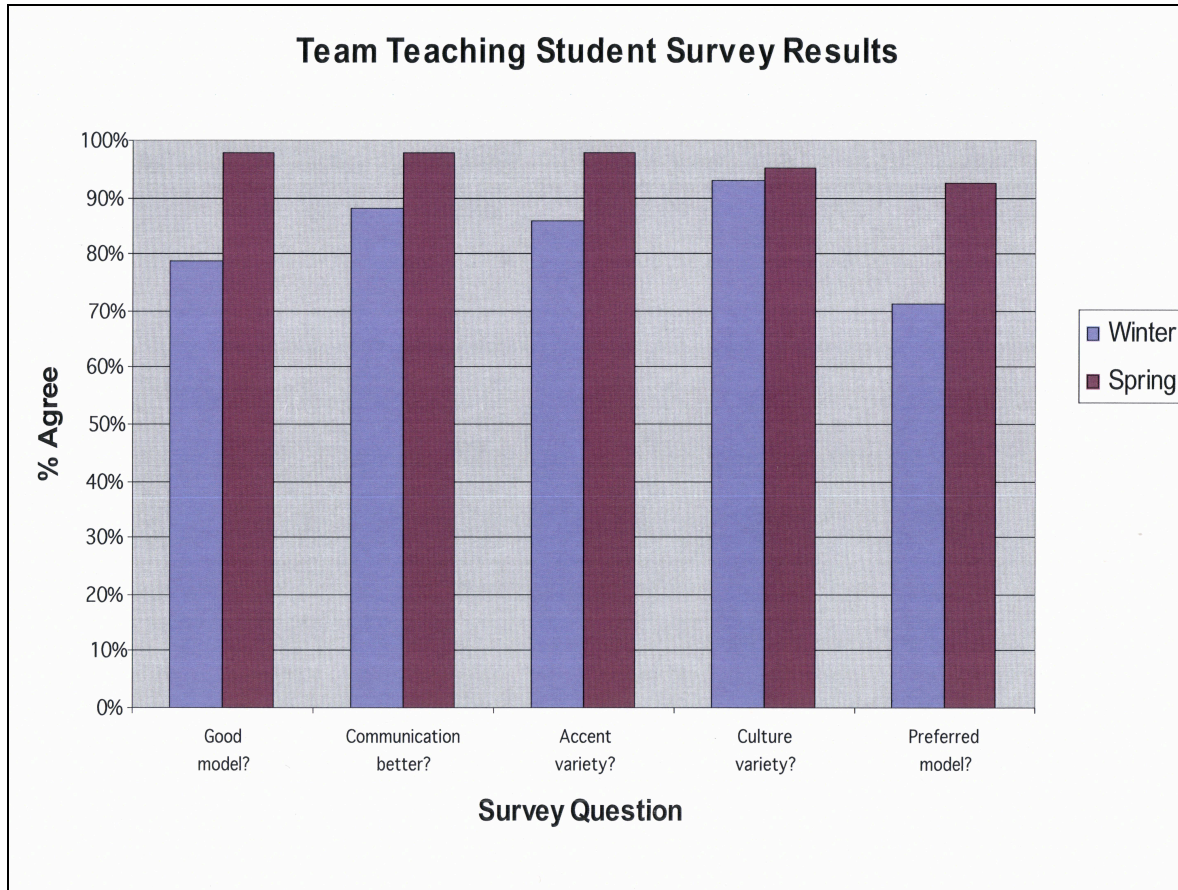


Figure 2. Results of Student Survey

The written comments at the bottom of the questionnaires were positive as well. In response to the prompt: “Further comments or recommendations:” students wrote that the personalities and teaching styles of the two teachers complimented each other and that students benefited from hearing two accents and seeing two different kinds of cultural presentations. Among the written comments:

“Team teaching is an amazing idea. Being exposed to two different teachers not only exposes us to diff (sic) accents & diff (sic) cultures but it gives you a change. Five days a

week for one class gets repetitive & w/ two teachers it makes things more bearable.”

“I really liked having two teachers, especially with two different teaching (styles); it brings in a huge variety and makes learning Spanish more interesting.”

“Lesson plans/style of teaching were both very different, yet complemented each other well. It was nice to hear two accents.”

“Both teachers have different types of expectations and personality. It is fun to come to class. It also makes Spanish fun to learn.”

“I really enjoyed having 2 different teachers! At first I was skeptical, but it was AWESOME to be exposed to different accents, teaching styles, cultures, etc. They did great!”

“Laura & Steven were both good teachers. I don’t think it would have gone so well if one had been bad.”

Criticisms that did arise in the student classroom interviews and on the written evaluation forms mostly focused on the rare occurrence of communication breakdown in which material was presented twice or there was some type of inconsistency in terms of explaining assignments and what was expected in the assignments. In the interviews, two students who were struggling with the material blamed the team-teaching model for their poor grades. There were also written comments such as the following:

“I like getting to know one teacher explicitly. I feel like I will be exposed to different accents and varieties of cultural knowledge by taking different classes. I don’t need two varieties in one class.”

“The experience was kind of confusing. Hearing 2 accents might be good, but definitely not on the exam. (It doesn’t help.)”

As for the instructors, both said that they were extremely satisfied with this teaching model for a number of reasons including the satisfaction that came from collaborating with another instructor, the increase in time that they were able to dedicate to each lesson plan, and the fact that they spent much less time commuting.

In two interviews over the course of the year, Steven said that the only negative aspect to this collaboration was the amount of time it took to coordinate and organize the sharing of responsibilities during the first quarter. However, once the work was done it translated directly into the second quarter. In all other aspects, such as teaching load, professional development, and satisfaction from teaching, Steven said he rated the experience very high. After working for two decades in a position of power in the corporate world, it was a big adjustment to have to accommodate a partner. “To share your class feels like an invasion of territory,” said Steven. “But that was expected, and wanted. I had to learn to give up control, which was a good experience. I think because we both had to do it we formed a psychological bond.”

One of the main advantages for Steven was the reduction by 50% of the time he spent commuting. “Now I’m not suffering. I have all this extra time. I feel like I’ve recovered my life,” said Steven about the reduction in driving. “Before, I felt like quitting. “ Less time spent on the freeway also had an economic benefit, less money spent on gasoline. Two other benefits

for Steven were a reduction of stress and the satisfaction of having more time to prepare for classes, which he felt was beneficial for his students.

Laura echoed many of the sentiments expressed by Steven concerning the satisfaction of successfully creating the team model, developing a professional relationship with a teaching partner, and reducing both stress and commute time. Her only complaint was the fact that it took longer to form a strong psychological bond with the students. "The biggest difference was that I had to make more of an effort to get to know them. I have to work much harder to establish that click because I see them half the time and they also have another teacher," said Laura.

As for the supervisor of the university's beginning Spanish courses, she said she was satisfied that the team teaching model worked well with these two instructors. She believed that their students had been given an excellent education in Spanish, in part because they had gotten the benefit of the best qualities of each instructor, they had grown accustomed to two different accents, and they had learned from a variety of cultural presentations from both instructors. Her main concern was that the student evaluations for Steven had suffered in comparison to his evaluations from the previous quarter. She said that although both Spanish II classes benefited greatly from Steven's expertise in technology through the web page design, the development of the grade book, and the organization of the division of the teaching load, it was not necessarily apparent to the students that Steven was the person that had brought these benefits to the class. Laura's strengths, however, were readily apparent to the students. In the written evaluations of the teaching styles of the two instructors, Laura got higher marks, in part because of her extensive classroom experience and her knowledge of communicative and interactive methodology. Overall, it was the supervisor's perception that both classes benefited as much from having Steven as an instructor as from having Laura as an instructor.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This Team Teaching model has proven to be successful from the perspective of the instructors, their supervisor, and a majority of the students. For supervisors of beginning language courses that are considering implementing this model, I would make the following recommendations:

- 1) Careful choice of the teaching team - This model works best in the hands of competent, mature and motivated teachers whose teaching styles mesh well together. It is not a model that should be used to compensate for the inabilities of a weak teacher.
- 2) A design that minimizes the need for communication - Given the fluid nature of language classes, anyone considering this model should employ a design that minimizes the need for communication between the two instructors, such as the design developed by Steven and Laura. This design gives each individual very clear responsibilities and minimizes the possibilities for confusion and repetition of material.
- 3) Regular communication - After creating a design that minimizes the **need** for communication, the instructors must establish a pattern for regular communication in order to keep abreast of confusions, conflicts and positive situations that develop within the classroom community.
- 4) Oversight by a supervisor - Although the need for oversight by the supervisor beyond what would be required for any other beginning language course has, in this

case, been minimal, the equal division of labor between two peers of a daily class might result in problems that require assistance or intervention. In case the need arises, there should be a supervisor working with the teaching team.

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APPENDIX I**Team Teaching Evaluations
Department of Spanish**

Instructors: _____
 Course: SPAN 2A
 Quarter: Winter

Please evaluate the following statements by marking the answer that comes closest to capturing your opinion:

1. The Team Teaching approach is a good model for delivering the course content of Spanish 2.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 1 Agree 5 Agree 7 Disagree 2 Disagree 2 Disagree 2

2. This team of teachers was well organized and appeared to communicate adequately so as not to overlap in presentation of material.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 5 Agree 6 Agree 4 Disagree 3 Disagree 1 Disagree 0

3. Having two teachers was beneficial because I was exposed to two different accents and two different ways of using Spanish.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 6 Agree 2 Agree 7 Disagree 1 Disagree 1 Disagree 2

4. Having two teachers was beneficial because I had greater exposure to a variety of cultural presentations and learned different kinds of cultural knowledge from them.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 6 Agree 7 Agree 3 Disagree 2 Disagree 1 Disagree 0

5. I believe it was better to learn Spanish from two teachers this quarter than it would have been to learn Spanish from one teacher.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 1 Agree 4 Agree 4 Disagree 5 Disagree 3 Disagree 2

Further comments or recommendations:

APPENDIX II

**Team Teaching Evaluations
Department of Spanish**

Instructors: _____
 Course: SPAN 2B
 Quarter: Winter

Please evaluate the following statements by marking the answer that comes closest to capturing your opinion:

1. The Team Teaching approach is a good model for delivering the course content of Spanish 2.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 5 Agree 13 Agree 2 Disagree 3 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

2. This team of teachers was well organized and appeared to communicate adequately so as not to overlap in presentation of material.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 3 Agree 13 Agree 6 Disagree 1 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

3. Having two teachers was beneficial because I was exposed to two different accents and two different ways of using Spanish.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 14 Agree 6 Agree 1 Disagree 2 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

4. Having two teachers was beneficial because I had greater exposure to a variety of cultural presentations and learned different kinds of cultural knowledge from them.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 11 Agree 11 Agree 1 Disagree 0 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

5. I believe it was better to learn Spanish from two teachers this quarter than it would have been to learn Spanish from one teacher.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 8 Agree 9 Agree 4 Disagree 1 Disagree 1 Disagree 0

Further comments or recommendations:

APPENDIX III

**Team Teaching Evaluations
Department of Spanish**

Instructors: _____
 Course: SPAN 2A
 Quarter: Spring

Please evaluate the following statements by marking the answer that comes closest to capturing your opinion:

1. The Team Teaching approach is a good model for delivering the course content of Spanish 2.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 11 Agree 5 Agree 3 Disagree 0 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

2. This team of teachers was well organized and appeared to communicate adequately so as not to overlap in presentation of material.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 10 Agree 7 Agree 2 Disagree 0 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

3. Having two teachers was beneficial because I was exposed to two different accents and two different ways of using Spanish.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 13 Agree 4 Agree 2 Disagree 0 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

4. Having two teachers was beneficial because I had greater exposure to a variety of cultural presentations and learned different kinds of cultural knowledge from them.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 13 Agree 4 Agree 2 Disagree 0 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

5. I believe it was better to learn Spanish from two teachers this quarter than it would have been to learn Spanish from one teacher.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
 Agree 12 Agree 4 Agree 2 Disagree 1 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

Further comments or recommendations:

Team Teaching Evaluations
Department of Spanish

Instructors: _____
Course: SPAN 2B
Quarter: Spring

Please evaluate the following statements by marking the answer that comes closest to capturing your opinion:

1. The Team Teaching approach is a good model for delivering the course content of Spanish 2.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
Agree 4 Agree 13 Agree 4 Disagree 1 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

2. This team of teachers was well organized and appeared to communicate adequately so as not to overlap in presentation of material.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
Agree 6 Agree 11 Agree 5 Disagree 1 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

3. Having two teachers was beneficial because I was exposed to two different accents and two different ways of using Spanish.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
Agree 7 Agree 10 Agree 3 Disagree 1 Disagree 1 Disagree 0

4. Having two teachers was beneficial because I had greater exposure to a variety of cultural presentations and learned different kinds of cultural knowledge from them.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
Agree 9 Agree 10 Agree 2 Disagree 1 Disagree 0 Disagree 0

5. I believe it was better to learn Spanish from two teachers this quarter than it would have been to learn Spanish from one teacher.

Strongly Somewhat Somewhat Strongly
Agree 9 Agree 10 Agree 1 Disagree 1 Disagree 1 Disagree 0

Further comments or recommendations: