

Adding Realism to Coloured Belt Self Defence Syllabus

Conditioning for Self Defence

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Introduction

One of the things that sets Taekwon-Do apart from other schools of martial arts is its ability to adapt its teachings to address areas of its syllabus that, for one reason or another, are either no longer appropriate or need to be updated to reflect the changing times. One very good example of this is the recent changes that have been made to the coloured belt self defence syllabus. The move to simpler defences and realistic attacks has improved our ability to teach self defence to larger classes across a range of ages and grades; while shifting away from the contrived and unrealistic style from previous years.

It is important that our students have a realistic sense of their ability to physically defend themselves.

For those who have attended one of the Protect self defence courses with Mr and Mrs Thompson you will know that training under the stress of a realistic situation does wonders for your confidence. It also provides opportunities for you to find new applications for techniques you already knew, but never thought to use in that particular way.

While this way of training is great for more experienced students, if we try and teach self defence the same way to our younger students we are likely to lose them due to either injury, being too physically intense for them to handle or (on the psychology side of things) boring and pointless.

So how can we teach these concepts in way that keeps our students safe and wanting to learn? If we add four key aspects to what we are already teaching, I believe we will see the effectiveness of the coloured belts self defence lift at gradings and have students who are more prepared in the event they ever have to use their self defence outside of the dojang.

These key aspects are:

1. Using your voice
2. Making it work
3. Appropriate response
4. Applying psychology

Use Your Voice

When you encounter a threatening situation your body is likely to have a fear reaction due to your body preparing itself for the 'fight or flight' response.

Everyone will react differently to fear but some commonly observed reactions are dry mouth, shaking and short, shallow breathing. These effects will likely worsen if the situation becomes physical and then shallow, panicked breathing will not be your friend. You may even find you naturally hold your breath when defending yourself while in a bit of a panic.

As an exercise, try this with a partner. Stand facing each other holding each others lapels. Now both of you try and get behind the other and grab them in a bear-hug. Do this while holding your breath.

Very quickly you will find yourself getting tired and feeling weak. Hopefully no one passed out while trying this but it is also a possible outcome.

Now imagine feeling like this while you are fighting for your life. It's a scary thought.

The odds of you or your students ever needing to use self-defence in a life or death situation are very slim but you should never discount that possibility.

While it might not be something you talk about with younger students, you should keep it in your mind that you are teaching a skill that could one day save their life. You need to make sure what they are practicing is effective.

One of the simplest things you can do to improve the effectiveness of your students self defence is to encourage them to use their voice, in particular to kihap. A kihap encourages regular deep breathing. If you aren't breathing, you can't kihap. While feeling the effects of adrenaline, a strong kihap can keep you breathing without having to worry about it.

Apart from keeping you breathing there are several other benefits of kihaping. A nice loud kihap can attract attention to the situation. You may end up with someone coming to help or calling the police. It might even be enough to make your attacker think "this is too much attention for my liking" and leave you alone.

A nice strong, loud kihap also makes you feel strong and powerful. This can change your mindset from that of a victim to being in a position of power and provides a psychological benefit to the defender and potentially intimidate the attacker.

Simple commands can have the same effect once you are in a controlling position. I will discuss this further in the next section. However it is a bad idea to use commanding language in the pre-contact stage of self defence as this can escalate the situation and make it harder to avoid a physical confrontation. That being said, it is still appropriate to use your voice during the pre-contact stage but in a different way which I will elaborate on in the psychology section.

Make It Work

A distinction needs to be made between learning a new technique and practicing self defence. While learning a new technique it is appropriate, and recommended, to go slowly and to reset yourself if things don't work right. This provides the opportunity to focus on one thing at a time and build up the technique piece by piece.

Carrying this through to your practice can create a dangerous habit. By doing so, you will teach yourself to perform the techniques this particular way. In reality there are no do-overs in self defence.

It is important that your self defence works first time, every time. This doesn't necessarily mean that it's your first technique that works; but rather that your first reaction ultimately leads to success.

If you find a technique hasn't worked, try something else or try a softening technique. This could be as simple as a slap to the face or a kick to the shins.

I have two exercises that can help develop this habit.

The first is to have students in pairs. One partner performs some sort of lock to gain control, then the other partner does what they can from there to take the controlling position. Repeat this back and forward. After a while it might start to get a bit unrealistic but that is OK. You can always stop and restart. This exercise is best done in the learning stage.

The second exercise is for the practice stage. It is simply asking the defender "What's next?" and/or asking the attacker "Can you get out of that?".

This is to get the defender realising that maybe they don't have as good a controlling position as they thought.

If they do have a good position then point out what they are doing right to reinforce the good habit.

Both of these exercises are best done against a range of different partners. You might think you have a great wrist in-throw but then come up against someone who it doesn't work on at all. It is far better to discover this in a club situation and learn how to deal with it rather than have it happen when you really need it.

One thing I see happen quite often during training and at gradings is where the defender applies a wrist lock or arm bar and either gets stuck or hasn't got the attacker completely under control. To me, under control means the attacker is on the ground or in some other position where they are no longer a threat to your safety.

If you are having trouble getting someone under control, use your voice and try telling them to do what you want.

This can work at multiple levels of intensity. It could be the school bully giving you a bit of a shove. Putting a wrist lock on and telling them not to touch you again could be all you need to do. If the attacker is a bit more aggressive you might need to drop them to the ground and using your voice to provide the simple command "get down!" can shock them into compliance. All of a sudden, their perfect little victim is fighting back and yelling at them, and that's not what they signed up for.

Practice Appropriate Response

Students of different ages are going to face different self defence situations. Primary school age children may have problems with a school bully pushing and shoving them around whereas high school age children might have to deal with punching and kicking instead. Adult students may find themselves in a situation where either they are, or the aggressor is, intoxicated. All of this changes what an appropriate response is.

For example, if a young teenager was to grab me with a same side wrist grab and I broke his arm, this would be an inappropriate response.

Similarly if a 6 foot 5 inch 130kg guy was to grab me the same way, took a big swing at my head and all I did was a soft release, this would also be inappropriate.

In the first case it is way too much and I would end up charged with assault. In the second case it is not enough and I would probably end up unconscious.

You need to be able to moderate the level at which you respond but keep in mind that your safety comes first.

Fortunately, our syllabus is split into three sections that lend themselves to varied levels of response quite nicely.

The first set of five (the wrist grabs) are quite a low level of threat and therefore require a low level of response.

The second set of five (the lapel, shoulder and neck grabs) are a bit more aggressive and would require a stronger response, perhaps a counter attack and a locking technique.

The last set of five (the headlocks and body holds) are definitely very aggressive and require the greatest level of response; you may even need to go as far as subduing your opponent.

You can also see the threat level increase as you progress through the Dan grades with defending your self from the ground, from an armed opponent, and from multiple attackers.

This is one area where practicing as close to reality is the only way to improve.

Scenario training, similar to what we do at a protect seminar, is a lot of fun. Just remember to keep it appropriate for the dojang.

While we do use foul language at the protect seminar, to simulate reality as close as possible, your dojang probably has a few younger students and is also open to the public.

Try splitting your class into two teams. Get one group together as your attackers and give them a goal. This can be as silly or as serious as you want. Now tell them to pick someone from the team of defenders and go for it. The idea is to have a bit of lead up to anything physical so the defender learns to recognise different situations and how to react accordingly.

Understanding Psychology

The psychology of self defence is the hardest part to teach and, quite frankly, most of us aren't prepared to teach the psychological side of self defence anyway. It has never been a part of our syllabus and until recently I didn't even think of it as part of self defence.

I think we tend to ignore this aspect of self defence as it isn't included as part of our gradings. This is fine because it's not something that you can really grade.

The best thing you can do for yourself and your students is to attend a Protect self defence seminar. You will learn how to use your body language and voice to deescalate a situation, how to recognise when your body is telling you something isn't quite right and avoid a situation as well as the physical side of self defence.

For younger students it might not be appropriate to teach what you have learnt in the same detail as you may confuse or scare them off but you can filter what you have learnt and give them a foundation to build on as they get older.

There are aspects of psychology that we can apply which can be assessed in a grading situation. This all centres around preventing your students falling into a victim mentality and have already been mentioned in previous sections of this essay.

A big part of making it work the first time, every time, is attitude. No matter whether you are performing a release or a controlling technique you need to have the attitude that this will work.

Anything less and you may get stuck and give up. At a grading this looks like you are unprepared and in reality could be dangerous.

Being able to read the situation and your opponents body language is a skill that will help you make an appropriate response. Is it something you can talk your way out of? Is it better to give up what they are asking for? Do you need to fight back and if so, how hard?

I've already touched on using your voice to empower yourself, but you can also use it to completely avoid a physical response.

What you say to avoid a situation will be different every time but there are a few things you should avoid saying.

1. Calm down - When someone is angry the last thing they want to be told is to calm down.
2. That they are wrong - The difference between saying "No it wasn't me" and "I think you have the wrong guy" is subtle but the first one can come across as quite aggressive.
3. That your not looking for trouble - I can almost guarantee that their response will be "Yeah?! Well you've got it now!"

Not all situations can be fixed by talking it out. Your best chance is when the attacker is driven by ego. It could be that they think you have insulted them somehow or they are frustrated and you are just the closest target. Perhaps they just want to intimidate you to make themselves feel big. Try and not let your own ego get sucked into the confrontation. If you can manage that then you stand a good chance of de-escalating the situation. Be prepared that they might fire off a verbal parting shot as they walk away. Let it slide. If you avoid getting in a fight, you win.

Summary

Self defence needs to be effective, and to be effective we need to teach and practice with as much realism as possible.

We can take advantage of the separated nature of our new syllabus to build up the skills in our students piece by piece. By encouraging your students to kihap, carry their defence through until it has worked and think about appropriate responses to different situations you will see their confidence increase and their techniques working more effectively.

This will translate into better performance at gradings and hopefully spark a desire to learn more about self defence.

Ultimately you will have students who can protect themselves should they ever need to.

In the end, the best self defence is having the confidence in your own abilities and knowing you can face any challenge presented to you.