

# Competency and Learning in Taekwon-Do

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*"Taekwon-Do is composed of fundamental movements, patterns, dallyon, sparring and self defence techniques."*

*(Taekwon-Do, p725)*

There are over 3,200 fundamental movements alone! To become an expert in Taekwon-Do, it is necessary to learn a large number of new skills.

There are four major stages a student will pass through when learning any new skill. These stages are: Unconscious Incompetence, Conscious Incompetence, Conscious Competence and Unconscious Competence.

This essay discusses the four different phases and how they apply to Taekwon-Do. It then goes on to discuss which phase I believe is the most important to the serious Taekwon-Do student.

## Phase One - Unconscious Incompetence

Students who are Unconsciously Incompetent are not even aware of what they do not know. They have no experience of the particular skill they are going to learn, so they are incompetent, but do not realise it!

In Taekwon-Do one example of an Unconscious Incompetent is a first-time student. Often a student on their first night will be introduced to punching. Advanced students are aware of many things which help create a perfect punch - forming a proper fist, pulling the other arm back at the same time to create reaction force, using sine wave, breath control, to name only a few. However the absolute beginner, the Unconscious Incompetent, is not even aware of all these aspects, let alone how to perform them.

Unconscious Incompetents cannot progress until they recognise that there are many things they do not know. Until this is realised, learning cannot begin.

## Phase Two - Conscious Incompetence

This phase describes the student who has realised what it is they do not know. Now they have the knowledge, but not the skill. They are incompetent and they know it!

In Taekwon-Do this would describe any student who has reached the point where they become aware that there is much more to a Taekwon-Do technique than they initially realised. Let's continue with our example of a student learning how to punch. If the student has learned about all the ingredients of the perfect punch, but has not yet practised them enough to become good at them, then that student is Consciously Incompetent.

The Conscious Incompetent is now in a position to truly begin learning their new skill. All they have to do is practice!

### Phase Three - Conscious Competence

This phase describes the student who has the knowledge to perform a particular skill, and has applied a lot of effort and time into learning their new skill. However the skill does not yet come automatically. They still have to think about the many ingredients of the new skill as they are performing it.

In Taekwon-Do this would describe any student who has practised enough that they are confident in their ability to perform the technique properly, but still have to concentrate on including everything as they execute the technique. Continuing with the example of the student learning to punch, they will now have the ability to execute a good Taekwon-Do punch. Some aspects of their technique may even have become automatic, but they will still have areas they need to think about. For example, if the student is breathing properly and using the reaction force automatically, but is still having to concentrate hard on sine wave, they are Consciously Competent.

### Phase Four - Unconscious Competence

Success!! The student has developed the skill to such a point that they can perform it without even thinking about it. The skill has become second nature.

The Taekwon-Do student learning how to punch can now punch properly without even thinking about it. As they perform a punch all the ingredients will be included automatically without any conscious thought.

*"In the case of the students of Taekwon-Do who have been in constant practice or the experts themselves, they spend no time thinking, as such an action comes automatically to them. Their actions, in short, have become conditioned reflexes"*

*(Taekwon-Do, p16)*

### Which phase is most important?

An initial assessment of the four phases suggests that the best phase to be in is Unconscious Competence. Students in this phase have become fully competent in their new skill and have to spend no time thinking about that technique. However a deeper study reveals that Unconscious Competence is by no means the most important phase.

General Choi's condensed encyclopedia Taekwon-Do helps us explore this topic:

*"The novice black belt holder will now really begin to learn technique. Now that he has mastered the alphabet, he can begin to read. Years of hard work and study await him before he can even begin to consider himself an instructor and expert. A perceptive student will, at this stage, suddenly realise how very little he knows"*

(Taekwon-Do, p727)

Although that excerpt from Taekwon-Do is aimed at first degree black belts, I believe that the concept applies to all students from 10th gup to 9th degree. General Choi makes this quite clear when he says:

*"I, myself, am only another student participating in a continuing and never-ending learning process"*

(Taekwon-Do, p25)

The key in General Choi's previous statement is that the learning process is continuing and never-ending. The student who attains Unconscious Competence and never questions their technique will never improve.

I believe the serious student should strive for Conscious Incompetence!

By this I do not mean that the student should try to become bad at the technique or undo what they have already learned. In fact this is virtually impossible as the skill is now a conditioned reflex.

What I do mean is that the true student will seek to discover something about their technique that they were not previously aware of. This can be achieved in many ways. For example: consulting the encyclopedia, asking an instructor, or discussing technique with another student.

This can be clearly illustrated by continuing with the example of the student learning how to punch. We have seen this student achieve a level of Unconscious Competence in punching - they are now performing a punch without even thinking about it. Let us imagine that the student attends a techniques seminar and learns that there is a better way to perform sine wave during a punch. The student has re-entered the Conscious Incompetence phase and is once again in a position to improve their Taekwon-Do.

Students who seek Conscious Incompetence will always have something to learn, and will always be improving.

## Conclusion

The serious student of Taekwon-Do is always seeking to improve, and continuously striving for perfection.

The danger lies in students believing they have perfected a technique, when in fact there is still much that they can learn. If students ever allow themselves to believe they have nothing left to learn they are likely to lose interest in Taekwon-Do and stop training. This is evident in the large number of people who achieve first degree black belt and then quit.

It is important to remain "in a continuing and never-ending learning process". By constantly seeking out new aspects of Taekwon-Do techniques to learn, by constantly striving for Conscious Incompetence, training will always be enjoyable and challenging.

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