

Thoughts On Teaching Patterns

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At every level of Taekwon-do, from 10th gup to 6th dan, either a single or multiple new patterns must be learned. In the majority of patterns, new techniques from hand and foot techniques, stepping motions to movements of the body are introduced to the student. While each pattern is difficult to master, every student must start somewhere and it is primarily up to the instructor to guide their students towards the mastery of patterns. The following essay will offer personal opinions on teaching patterns and on patterns in general.

Each pattern is a pre-set combination of fundamental movements, putting them together into a complete set of moves which combine to create the pattern. The purpose of patterns is to place a student into a hypothetical situation involving one or more opponents. While performing a pattern, a student is said to be defending, counter-attacking and even attacking these opponents. It is believed that through the practice of patterns, a student will develop these defence, counter-attack and attack movements into conditioned reflexes that are able to be used in self-defence. Every pattern is different, in order to place the student into various and increasingly challenging and complex situations. The purpose of such is to develop reactions to a diverse range of circumstances.

Following the composition of Taekwon-Do, preceding patterns is the teaching of fundamental movements. Through experience, it is a personal belief that before teaching the sequence of movements that together become a pattern, it is important to teach the new movements introduced in the pattern as fundamental movements. This step not only makes learning the pattern easier for the student but also makes teaching the pattern easier for the instructor. Several advantages exist in pursuing teaching fundamental movements before teaching the sequence of movements in patterns. The first is the basic separation of learning new movements from learning a new pattern sequence. This is important so as the student can concentrate on one new experience at a time. Otherwise, students may get anxious at their apparent lack of ability to learn not only a new movement but a new pattern sequence simultaneously. A second advantage in using fundamental movement exercises is to be able to concentrate on teaching correct technique right from the start. In this sense, an instructor can get students comfortable with the correct intermediate position, trajectory and execution of technique, and the correct finishing position of the technique. Lastly, this sets a foundation on which to start working towards the next grading. As part of grading, students are required to demonstrate basic exercises, generally of new techniques introduced at their current level. By performing new techniques as fundamental movements, the student is introduced to the idea of performing each technique on both sides: right and left, setting the correct foundation right from the beginning. Too often at gradings, it is observed that students do not show confidence in performing new techniques in line-work type situations, particularly when the technique is only used on one side in the pattern. The first example of such a movement is in Do-San Tul, where the straight fingertip thrust (san sonkut tulgi) is only performed on the right hand side.

However, there must be a warning in following this technique. When a student has graded and obtained their new rank, most students are eager to learn their new pattern as soon as possible. Prolonging the exercise of fundamental movements may create boredom and high levels of anticipation causing students to lose focus. At the extreme end of the spectrum, the extended delay in teaching them their new pattern could possibly discourage students, with some seeing the delay in learning their new pattern as an attempt at holding back a reward which they have earned. While teaching new techniques as fundamental movements, it is recommended to cut-short the process and limit the repetition of movements to eight steps, four forwards and four backwards. This will ensure quick turnaround while introducing the student to the new movements and accruing the advantages mentioned above.

Teaching the sequence of movements in a pattern is quite often a time consuming and at times frustrating experience for instructors. Conversely, the same can be said of students learning the new pattern. Both parties must recognise the time it takes to learn a new pattern and appreciate the role the other must play. For an instructor teaching a new pattern, one must remember not to expect every student to commit to memory an entirely new pattern set in one training night. With this in mind, patterns need to be broken down and students set milestones to reach in learning the pattern. Once each milestone is initially reached, the student should be taken back to the start, and allowed to work through the movements themselves until they confidently reach the milestone. With this achieved, the learning continues and the pattern sequence is carried on until the next milestone. Patience is required when teaching patterns, allowing the students to work through the movements in their own time. In this sense, instructors should refrain from stepping in at every sign of indecisiveness in the student but rather giving the student room to work through it themselves and only step in when the student is struggling or asks for help. It is personal experience that students enjoy this personal independence to work through the pattern in their own minds and to be able to solidify their learning internally without constant external help.

Once the student has learnt the sequence of movements and is confident in their ability to continue perfecting the technique, this is when instructors should move on to the specifics of each movement. There is little to be gained when correcting technical aspects of individual movements when the student is still trying to grasp the sequence of movements.

Every student should ideally know each technique they are performing inside-out. This ranges from the name of the technique to the correct intermediate and finishing positions to the use of the technique. Doing any technique without knowing what that movement is doing or what it is actually used for will leave the student with only a superficial understanding of what they are meant to do. Without deeper knowledge, it is a personal opinion that the student is actually unable to perform the movements correctly. The main, broad idea that encompasses all of this technical knowledge is labelled as the application of the technique. Aspects of application include not only the use of the technique but also where the movement starts (intermediate position), execution of the movement (trajectory from intermediate position) and the end position of the movement. Unless all these aspects are understood by the student, they are unable to do the movement correctly. Through the understanding of the application, the student will be able to internalise the use of the technique and hence be able to visualise how the technique should be done every time they do it. Without the visualisation of the application of the technique from start

to finish, a student is not able to perform the technique as it should be executed. During patterns, a student should be performing the technique as if they are actually performing it against an opponent. Hence, imagination will play an important role here and thus the internalisation of the technique's application is vital.

Application can also range from being for a specific use or for multiple or flexible uses. An example of a technique with a specific use is the palm hooking block (sonbadak golcho makgi) and a technique with multiple uses is the inner forearm side block (an palmok yop makgi). This being said, it is once again vital that the student knows which techniques are suited for which use. If a student does not know how to use the technique, this could cause injury through the student's use of the technique, in an inappropriate situation. One example is the forearm rising block (palmok chookyo makgi). Several times students have indicated that the forearm rising block can be utilised to block a downward kick (naeryo chagi). While it is obvious how such a conclusion can be reached by a student, it is frightful to think of a student using a single forearm to defend a full force downward kick from striking the top of their head. As such, understanding the specific use of every technique is critical, to develop a student's reflexes to utilise the correct technique for each specific situation if the need for real-life self-defence ever arises. However, the absence of knowing the incorrect application of the forearm rising block can be shared among both student and instructor.

In correcting technical aspects of a pattern, it is often useful to focus on groups of movements within the pattern, one at a time. By extracting a small sequence of movements from the pattern to concentrate on, the instructor can break-down those few movements and the student can focus on their ability to perform those specific movements correctly. Once a certain level of achievement has been achieved in performing these movements to an appropriate standard, it is important to re-integrate these movements back into the pattern. People often mistake that correcting techniques in isolation will lead to the correct performance of that technique within a pattern. This is usually not initially the case, as other characteristics of the pattern, such as flow, rhythm and general muscle memory, can inhibit the introduction of newly refined technique into the pattern set.

One good example of the above practice can be seen in the teaching of Do-San Tul. In this pattern there are 24 movements, all requiring varying degrees of skill. Quite often, in personal teaching experience, has there been a focus on two key movement sets. The first being the combination of the outer forearm high side block (pakat palmok nopunde yop makgi) followed by a middle reverse punch (kaunde bandai jirugi). Secondly, the combination of the outer forearm high wedging block (pakat palmok nopunde hechyo makgi), followed by a middle front snap kick (kaunde ap cha busigi) landing into a forefist middle front punch (ap joomuk kaunde ap jirugi) and a forefist middle reverse front punch in fast motion. Of course, both movement sets must be practiced on both sides, right and left. Once these movements from Do-San have been learnt, they can then be re-integrated back into the pattern as a whole. The interesting point comes in when calculating how much of the pattern should theoretically be technically sound by focusing on those two movement sets. Together, the two sets make up 16 movements in Do-San Tul, meaning through focusing on them, a student should be technically sound in two-thirds of the pattern by concentrating on, in total, six movements. It is important to note however, that as students move up the grades, such results of a small number of movements making up large

portions of a pattern increasingly becomes less prominent. However, focusing on specific movement sets is still important for concentrating on key or difficult movements in any pattern. For example, in Hwa-Rang Tul, it is important for students to extract and focus on refining the two turning kicks (dollyo chagi) in fast motion. If not done this way, the student must perform the entire pattern in order to practice those two kicks just once for every 29 movements performed.

When teaching patterns it is important, at the same time, to also teach students techniques of self-correction. It is obvious that moving up the ranks will require increasing amounts of practice. But with a limited and fixed amount of class time, it is near impossible to increase the amount of practice during formal training sessions. As such, a student must learn to become their own pseudo-instructor and it is the instructor's responsibility to guide and develop such a role within the student. In this sense, it is important to engage the student when correcting technique. Rather than simply physically correcting a technique, an instructor should, at the same time explain the reasoning for the correction being made, making sure the student understands the 'whys' of the correction (drawing parallels to the ideal that students should understand the full application of each technique). At the same time, instructors should actively ask students to self-assess themselves, asking leading questions such as what are you doing technically incorrect or what should be corrected. These questions should be asked whether the student is doing something incorrectly or correctly. It is important for both instructor and student to give praise or recognition when a technique is being done correctly. The purpose of asking such continual leading questions, is to help students internalise these questions, enabling them to ask the same questions of themselves when practicing without the help of an instructor or fellow student to watch for corrections to be made.

Following on from that, the building of mental checklist or visual signals and prompts is another important tool for self-correction. In terms of mental checklists, instructors should provide a few key points for students to look for, note and rectify if necessary every time a certain movement is performed. In class, this checklist should be run through and be kept in the same order every time it is used, as repetition further enhances internalisation of the checklist. An example of such a checklist can be used for a forefist middle front punch, where self-checks such as checking shoulders, fist height and fist position, i.e. punching centre line, is the fist formed correctly, and is the wrist straight; can be used. Such a mental list is obviously useful for students who are verbally and logically orientated. As such, other tools should be developed for those more visually orientated. This is where visual signals and prompts come in use. By not only verbalising corrections for checklists but also visually signalling the corrections, this allows visual learning to occur. Once again, the same prompts need to be used and repeated in order for students to recognise and internalise them. Building upon the previous example of the forefist middle front punch, visual prompts can include: tapping the shoulders while moving from a half-facing position to a full-facing position to indicate checking for shoulder position; for fist height and position, moving the fist from an incorrect position (such as high and shoulder line) to the correct position should be sufficient; and to indicate straight wrists, either signalling a bent wrist to a straight wrist or by running the other's hand palm across a flat wrist will both work. Other examples of useful signals are pointing to the eyes indicating remembering to keep the eyes straight or pointing to the chin to signal keeping the chin up. Through experience, using a wide variety of techniques to teach self-correction will help cater for the different learning styles that will exist within a group of students.

A last useful technique for instructors is to encourage students to actively engage their own minds when performing patterns. The engagement is to simply enhance the performance of techniques through remembering the correct way of performing techniques. It is a personal belief that while performing patterns, one should constantly remind oneself of the various things to correct when doing the pattern. By engaging one's mind, one is essentially prompting oneself while performing a pattern of ways to perform a technique correctly which hasn't quite been completely internalised into muscle memory. Examples of such prompts can be from simple reminders to cross on the inside for a forearm low block (palmok najundae makgi) or to keep the intermediate position for the hands at rib level for a forearm rising block, to more complex reminders such as how to perform sinewave in continuous motion or how to perform the flying side piercing kick in Choong-Moo Tul. By actively engaging their brain, students will be able to continuously learn and adapt to new feedback, by refining what prompts are used when performing specific movements.

Caution however must be exercised when actively engaging the brain when performing patterns. Some students may only be able to think of one correction at a time and as such, may only be able to correct one aspect of a technique at a time. This being said, once a student has refined a technique enough through active brain engagement to the point that the correction is automatically done, the student is then able to progress to the next correction. It is also important to note that not every movement needs to be actively engaged, as some movements may have been previously refined. However, students will have to be careful to not engage too much, so as to distract themselves from allowing the pattern to naturally flow from their body through muscle memory. It has been observed in the past, when students think too much about what they are doing, they somehow manage to completely lose their thought process and create large mind blanks.

A final note on teaching patterns is to not expect perfection by a student within a short period of time. When learning new techniques and pattern sets, a student's body will take time, to varying degrees from person to person, in committing to both muscle and long-term brain memory. As such, instructors should not demand perfection of a pattern before allowing students to advance and grade for their next level. Training in Taekwon-Do is a continual learning process and as such, it is not surprising for students to go back and correct a pattern that was learnt more than a year ago. As students progress in Taekwon-Do and their mind develops in understanding Taekwon-Do techniques, certain elements will just seem to 'click' at certain points in time. It is this process of 'clicking' within one's own brain that instructors must allow time for.

While patterns are an important and integral part of Taekwon-Do, instructors and students must also remember that it is only one out of five aspects that is identified in the composition of Taekwon-Do. Some students will be skilled at performing patterns, while others may be gifted in others areas such as sparring or destructions. Conversely, all Taekwon-Do students must learn their patterns in order to advance grades. It was the goal of this essay to provide some personal thoughts on teaching patterns that some will hopefully find useful, not only instructors but students as well. Patterns should not be looked at as a boring, mundane task of learning pre-set routines of movements but be seen as a challenging, stimulating exercise for one to strive for perfection and a sense of self-achievement when done correctly.

