

Teaching Karate to Students with Learning Difficulties

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1 What are ‘learning difficulties’?

The term ‘learning difficulties’ can mean many different things and in everyday use tends to imply someone who is beyond any reasonable hope of learning a new skill or sport, or gaining an achievement. Considering the two words separately, a dictionary definition for learning is *knowledge gained through study*, while for difficulties the definition is *a difficult thing to do or understand.* With this broader definition of the term ‘learning difficulties’ it is useful to see how this relates to problems faced by both students of karate and their instructors. Learning difficulties for students takes many different forms and exists at many levels of severity. For example, a student may experience only minor learning difficulties in a particular area of karate and be able to overcome them or adapt to them relatively easily, whilst the same learning difficulty for another student may be a major hurdle to overcome.

It is useful to attempt to categorise learning difficulties experienced by students of karate into different types. In this study three categories are defined, although other categorisations could be equally valid, and these are physical, attitude and mental. Each difficulty is now discussed in turn.

2 Physical learning difficulties

Physical learning difficulties that karate students experience may be long-term problems that a student has suffered from prior to starting karate, or a shorter-term injury that has been picked-up during either training, competition or outside of the sport. In both cases the student and instructor must adjust their expectations of what can be achieved.

2.1 Longer-term problems

Taking the longer-term problems first, these take many different forms and can be related to a student’s age, health and previous physical lifestyle. For beginners to karate, probably the most common health-related learning difficulty is physical fitness. This may be related to a lifestyle with little previous physical exercise, being overweight or a combination of the two. For a student in this situation the problem should be curable provided that the student is willing to put in sufficient training time and adjust their general lifestyle habits to become more healthy. For the instructor, adjustments should be made as to what is expected of such students while their physical fitness improves.

Other common health problems that cause difficulty in learning karate are more physical in nature and include knee, back, shoulder and elbow problems. These may be age-related or the result of injuries picked up before starting karate. In many cases these problems may not be such an obstacle to learning karate as the student may have initially thought. In fact, regular karate training often eases many of these problems. Where this is not the case, the student and instructor should develop modifications to normal training routines to accommodate the problem. In extreme cases, if the problem becomes worse, training should be suspended and professional medical advice sought.

Table 1: Common regions of injuries across five different martial arts (reproduced from [1]).

Style	Upper extremity	Lower extremity	Groin	Trunk	Head/neck
Karate	17	23	1	15	10
Tae kwon do	41	57	18	25	31
Aikido	43	34	6	26	32
Kung fu	21	36	5	13	10
Tai chi	7	7	0	7	7

2.2 Injury

The second physical-based learning difficulty is shorter-term and tends to be centered around injuries. By its very nature, students of karate are likely to become injured at some point in their training or during competitions. The fact that most parts of the body can be used in karate for either attack or blocking means most parts are susceptible to injury. Table 1 is taken from [1] and shows the percentage of students who have injured one of five different areas of their body during participation in martial arts, namely: upper extremity, lower extremity, groin, trunk and head/neck. The table also compares karate with four other martial arts; tae kwon do, aikido, kung fu and tai chi.

The injury profiles for different martial arts varies considerably. Karate and kung fu are broadly similar, with a moderate occurrence of injury that is most likely to affect the lower extremity. Tae kwon do and aikido have much higher levels of injury that affect the upper extremity and in particular the head. Tai chi has a much lower incidence of injury with equal distribution over upper and lower extremities. In fact, for a karate student who is suffering from severe and repetitive injuries, possibly age-related, changing to Tai chi should be considered.

The table has shown that injury is not uncommon in karate. However its likelihood and severity can be reduced by correct training and adjustments to a student’s lifestyle. For example, [2] lists poor technique, insufficient warm-up, over-intensive training, poor diet, insufficient sleep and excess alcohol as factors that increase the likelihood of injury. The severity of the learning difficulty that an injury causes depends on both the severity and location of the injury. For minor injuries, the learning difficulty may require only small reductions in training. For more severe injuries, training may need to be stopped until rehabilitation is complete, or at least the affected area should be rested while continuing with restricted training.

3 Attitude learning difficulties

Problems with a student’s attitude and commitment to karate are probably the hardest learning difficulty for the instructor to overcome. In fact, of all the reasons a karate student may have for giving up, a poor attitude is probably the most common. Attitude-based learning difficulties take many different forms and exist at varying levels of severity. Difficulties with attitude may be present with the student even before they start training or can develop at any stage once training has begun.

3.1 Over confidence

In his book, Tomiyama [3] states that a number of students start with a ‘chip on their shoulder’ – often a street fighter looking for more techniques in his armoury. Many of these drop-out quite soon, but others can be brought round by a combination of the friendly and respectful atmosphere of a good club, and the challenge of mastering a new art.

Another common attitude that surfaces early on is the student who has ‘done it all before.’ This is often noticed when a father and son/daughter begin training and the father has studied martial arts

previously. The father is keen to impress his child and can ignore the training given by the instructor and, even worse, start giving the child the instructions himself. In almost all cases this is bad for all concerned – father, child and instructor – and presents a challenging environment for the instructor to overcome. If possible, the pair should be split up for the majority of the lessons and the child made to focus on the instructor until they become used to the instructor providing the training rather than the father. Overcritical attention can be usefully directed at the father with the aim of him realising first that he needs to concentrate on his own training and second that he is not qualified to instruct.

Within the same theme, other attitude problems leading to learning difficulties include over confidence which may arise from a student having studied martial arts previously, or a student who perceives himself/herself as at the top of their class. A similar approach can be adopted here as with the interfering father, by delivering overcritical attention with the aim of bringing that person back into a learning mental attitude.

3.2 Poor commitment and effort

Another learning difficulty related to poor attitude is a lack of effort or commitment by the student. The result of this is irregular training, and when training does take place this is usually ineffective with the student displaying a lack of attention and effort. Poor attendance at training sessions can be caused by a number of reasons but the end result is the same – a lack of progress and general decline in motivation. A student in this situation is likely to give up training altogether, particularly once peer group students are continuing to progress. A talking to by an instructor may rectify the situation, but karate students do have a very high drop-out rate with probably 50% not continuing to their first grading.

Poor effort and lack of attention during training is most common among junior students and is often the start of what will become irregular training and eventual drop-out. Of course, for many students, starting karate is a ‘taster’ and it is down to the student’s own choice whether or not to continue. However, students should be given every opportunity to continue and this can come from both instructor and other students in the class. As a first option, a change to regular training patterns can be tried although students must not think that they can compromise basic training. If poor attention continues then this must be raised with the student and they be asked to consider whether they should continue training. For a junior student, a parent should probably be involved in the discussion.

4 Mental learning difficulties

Mental-based learning difficulties differ from the previous section in that attitude is not a problem but instead issues such as confidence and shyness inhibit a student’s progress. Most students experience some level of nervousness in karate. This may be when they first start training or are requested to move from a beginner’s class to a senior class. In other cases it may be nervousness in sparring or a lack of confidence in demonstrating a kata, or even shouting ‘kia.’

In all these instances a friendly and supportive approach to training by the instructor is a good approach. Through experience, instructors should recognise times when a student may be nervous and should adjust their approach to training accordingly. For example, kata can be demonstrated first to just the instructor, then to small groups before being shown to a whole class.

A slightly different mental-based learning difficulty is the student who is simply trying too hard. This is often recognised by a stiff, tense body and visible signs of tension when the student perceives that techniques are not being delivered effectively. Students experiencing this form of learning difficulty should be encouraged to relax. Pad-work is a useful demonstration of the negative effect that trying too hard has on technique and power.

5 Summary

This brief report has categorised learning difficulties in karate into physical, attitude and mental. Of these the most serious to progression and enjoyment is that of poor attitude. A student with poor attitude is unlikely to train effectively and is also most likely to withdraw from training altogether. In many instances, students with quite severe physical problems continue to train for many years, having recognised their limitations and adjusted their training accordingly. Mental-based learning difficulties are probably least serious, assuming that appropriate levels of support are provided by instructors.

In fact for most learning difficulties the best way to deal with them is through prevention rather than cure and this comes down to the nature of the karate club itself. Key attributes that a club must display are etiquette, discipline, support and respect. From the start, these attributes nurture the student to avoid problems such as lack of confidence, poor attitude and poor effort. Alongside this, it is important for instructors to treat each student as an individual and adjust their expectations accordingly.

References

- [1] M.N. Zetaruk, "Injuries in martial arts: a comparison of five styles", *British Journal Sports Medicine*, vol. 39, pp. 29-33, 2005
- [2] L.P. Peterson and P. Renstrom, *Sports injuries: their prevention and treatment*, 1999
- [3] K. Tomiyama, *Fundamentals of Karate-do*, SK Enterprises, 1990