The Use of Comfort Zones in Teaching Motor Skills

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The following assumptions are fundamental to understanding the concept of "comfort zones:"

- Motor skills generally contain "key elements," or parts, that must be performed correctly to make successful execution of the skill possible.
- Motor learning occurs in stages (i.e., a progression).
- The first stage is dominated by high levels of cognitive processing, including conscious attention to, and control of, all details of the skill. The ability to do this is subject to the limitations of cognitive capacity.
- As learning progresses, control and monitoring are gradually delegated to lower control structures (i.e., subconscious) until the movement package approximates a reflexive action which may be initiated in stimulus/response fashion.
- A large number of correct executions are required to ingrain the skill to the extent just described and...
- Many teaching/learning situations are too brief to permit this to occur.

During the initial stages of teaching a novel skill, it is frequently advantageous to strip the skill down to its simplest form such that, if any other elements were removed, the skill would cease to exist. The most basic form of the skill should be the easiest for the learner to acquire. This skill is then presented according to the instructor's preferences but with the performance goal of establishing the key elements of the skill, in correct sequence, and with appropriate timing.

When the learner is capable of doing this, all key elements should be in place and properly sequenced, etc., but complete conscious attention is required to make this happen. At this stage, the learner is experiencing success, and has developed a level of comfort and security with the skill. As such, the learner can be thought to be in a "comfort zone" when performing the skill. When new elements are added to the basic skill, in the context of a progression, two problems are created. First, the learner is being asked to venture away from their comfort zone by risking failure with a new skill. Second, new skill components are being added to the list of the key elements that must fall under the learner’s conscious control, thus creating problems with cognitive capacity. The typical result is that attention shifts from the key components of the original skill, to the novel performance requirements of the new variation of the skill, and the attempt fails.

To illustrate, consider the example of an alpine ski progression as a component of a cross county ski class. A snowplow position and stop are generally taught early. Key elements include an appropriate body position, both skis stemmed, and leg angulation to produce an edged ski. Once students can perform this skill, and components are added to produce a snowplow turn, the snowplow position

generally comes apart. The knees straighten, the wedge becomes a wide track, and angulation and edging disappear. The result is failure and frustration.

The idea of the comfort zone teaching technique is to interrupt practice of the new skill after few attempts, and re-establish the skill in its most basic form. The instructor reviews the key elements, and the basic skill is practiced and restored. Now the new skill is re-taught, and practice ensues. If problems are encountered, the class goes back to the comfort zone, and then back and forth until the new skill is learned. This means that the comfort zone has been expanded to include the new skill. Students are now ready for the next step in the progression, perhaps a "Stem Christie" in our example. When problems arise, the class goes back to the snowplow turn, or the original snowplow position, if necessary, to re-establish the key elements.

The comfort zone teaching technique can be explained according to motor learning theory. In our example, the snowplow position to snowplow turn sequence is surely an easy-to-hard progression. The subsequent reversal of the sequence could be construed as a hard-to-easy progression. If so, the technique could be described as an alternating repetition of easy-to-hard and hard-to-easy progressions. It is hoped that this sequence will produce positive intra-task transfers of learning that are alternatively proactive and retroactive. Positive intra-task transfers are considered to occur when experiences with one version of a skill provide insight into performing variations of that skill. This is consistent with the author's belief that the comfort zone teaching technique helps students learn to process their practice experiences, and that the conceptual representations of both the basic skill, and the new skill, are strengthened by each repetition of the cycle.

The author considers the "comfort zone" teaching technique to be effective, and versatile enough to have application in a wide variety of teaching/learning situations. It is of particular value when time limitations prevent practicing the new skill until motor control and monitoring are reduced to the level of automaticity, or ‘muscle memory,’ before progressing to a new skill in a sequence. This is a condition that is virtually ubiquitous.