

Does being an instructor help or hinder our own training and progression in Taekwon-Do? How do you know? Pros and Cons? Advice for others?

This essay will explore the question of whether being an instructor helps or hinders our training and progression in Taekwon-Do and how we know either way. This essay will look at some of the pros and cons of being an instructor in relation to our own training and progression.

Evidence would suggest being an instructor does not hinder progression

Of the 65 Head Instructors of the 59 clubs listed on the ITKD website, 43, or 66.2% are 4th Dan and above.¹ As the table below shows, the largest group of Head Instructors at just under half of all Head Instructors sit within the 4th to 6th Dan range. A total of 12 Head Instructors are 5th Dan, with 9 each at 4th and 6th Dan.

Table 1: Proportion of Head Instructors by Rank

| Rank | Number of Instructors | Proportion of all Instructors |
|----------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| I - III | 22 | 33.8% |
| IV - VI | 30 | 46.2% |
| VII - IX | 13 | 20.0% |

It is also evident that among the Head Instructors in the 1st to 3rd Dan range, the majority (but not all) are newer instructors, having taken on their roles recently relative to other instructors.

Thus, on the face of the evidence available it appears that being an instructor does not hinder progression. Two-thirds of our Head Instructor cohort have reached the rank of 4th Dan or above. To progress to this level requires commitment to training. As many of the current instructor cohort are long-standing instructors, the evidence shows they have successfully combined instructing their clubs with their own progression.

Data suggests a strong correlation between male instructors and progression, and between larger clubs and progression

An important observation I have made when looking into data, is that 47 of the 65 Head Instructors are men, and only 18 are women. That is, 72.3% of Head Instructors are men, and only 27.7% of Head Instructors are women. Of the 80 4th Dans and above currently registered with ITFNZ, only 17 (21%) are female. This would suggest that the majority of women who have progressed to 4th Dan and above, have done so while being instructors.²

Cutting the data another way reveals that of the largest 20 clubs by size, 21 of the 25 Head Instructors within this group are 4th Dan and above. That is, 84% of the Head Instructors running the largest 20 clubs are 4th Dan and above. Of the largest 20 clubs by size, only four Head Instructors are 1st to 3rd Dan. This could suggest that when it comes to progression, an instructor is likely to be advantaged if running a larger club. This makes sense intuitively as larger clubs are likely to have a cohort of Assistant Instructors or seniors who provide support while the instructor trains towards progression. However,

¹ Itkd.co.nz; club locations section.

² This is despite females making up 37% of our membership numbers overall (as at December 2022). Of the 399 1st Dans and above currently registered with ITFNZ, 36% are female.

it should be noted that several senior Black Belts within the organisation run clubs that are not in the top 20 by size, but have progressed to senior ranks nonetheless. Thus, while having access to a depth of support that might come with a larger club, this evidence is inconclusive in terms of the link between club size and instructor progression.

Correlation is not causation however, and there is likely to be a positive bias in the data

It is likely that there is a stronger link between the characteristics a Head Instructor possesses, and personal progression, including but not limited to, a passion for Taekwon-Do and an enthusiasm for learning, drive, motivation, determination and ambition. It is human nature for people to strive for and find satisfaction in personal learning and growth, to face and overcome challenges, and to set and achieve goals. Given Taekwon-Do provides for the development of both physical and mental strength, it is likely to attract those who find stimulation and reward in developing both the mind and the body, to be the best version of themselves that they can be. These achievements are found in both personal progression and in instructing.

What the data does not tell us, is the number of potential instructors who choose not to step into instructing if instructing is a perceived or real barrier to personal progression. Thus, there is likely to be a positive bias in the data available – that is, the data reveals that instructors do progress, but does not reveal those that choose not to instruct in order to progress. This is particularly the case for women, who (and with the risk of stereotyping) tend to carry the larger proportion of ‘home management’ compared to their male counterparts. This is clearly evident in the data on the percentage of instructors who are women compared to men.

My own experience suggests this is a very real concern for those considering stepping into instructing. I encouraged two black belts to open clubs in Wellington. One, however, was reluctant primarily because he would not have the time to train himself, and progress to higher ranks. He is a personal trainer and starts work at 5am most days, and he has three young children. We conversed over this topic for several weeks and I was honest with him – that at times, our own progression might take a back seat to other priorities. He has since gone on to grade again while running his club. I think ultimately what makes it work for us, including for this student, is having a supportive and patient home environment, that enables us to set and achieve these goals.

A qualified instructor must combine the qualities of a scholar and a soldier

There is a complementary relationship between being an instructor and progression through to ranks to senior Dan levels, with the benefits of each reinforcing the other. In fact, it is clear that this complementary relationship is what General Choi Chong Hi envisaged when he developed the Art.

The General envisaged of the Art that “soldiers are only as strong as the general who leads them, and, in a like manner, students can only excel under an excellent instructor. We cannot expect a bamboo to grow in a field of reeds, nor can we expect to find an outstanding pupil under an unqualified teacher. ... Therefore, a qualified instructor must combine the qualities of a scholar and a soldier if he is to produce pupils of noble character and outstanding skills.”³

³ Black Belt Techniques Syllabus, International Taekwon-Do (2019 Edition), page 45, ‘Ideal Instructor’.

There are several points in the above few sentences that suggest that instructors should not only work towards progression for their own development, but crucially, for that of their students. The above sentences imply that:

- leaders need to be as strong or stronger than students, which in turn means a leader needs to build and maintain his/her own physical and mental skills
- leaders must continue to build their knowledge and skills to lead well so that students succeed and some excel

The last sentence is telling – “a qualified instructor must combine the qualities of a scholar and a soldier...” A scholar is someone of great knowledge and intellect, and of great wisdom. The status of scholar can only be gained through years of learning and progressing in the subject matter. A soldier is someone of great strength and fortitude, and again, to become an effective soldier requires years of training.

Being an instructor advantages those seeking progression in a number of ways

Each pathway – instructing and progression through ranks - provide avenues to deepen levels of knowledge, skills, experience and wisdom within the Art. Taekwon-Do is highly technical in nature and it can take more than one's own lifetime to perfect some of its elements. It is therefore without doubt that the more senior a person becomes, the deeper their knowledge, experience and understanding of Taekwon-Do becomes. This not only makes them a better practitioner, but a more knowledgeable and effective instructor.

As an instructor you are incentivised to grow your knowledge to be a better instructor and pass on your knowledge and expertise to your students. One of the significant advantages of being an instructor is the opportunity to sit alongside examiners when grading students. Gradings, if viewed through a professional development lens, are an important opportunity for an instructor to absorb new information and grow a much deeper knowledge base. It is one of the few times an instructor and an examiner are watching and assessing the same students. This is an opportunity not afforded non-instructors and it is through these repeated experiences that instructor's get feedback on their performance as an instructor, implicitly, through the performance of their students.

As an instructor myself, I've always left a grading with new knowledge to apply, or more is the case now as an experienced instructor, I'm reminded of something that I may have been less focused on in recent weeks.

In addition, instructor's attend instructor specific courses, such as the IIC and Instructor Update courses. The knowledge gained through attending these courses benefits instructor's and therefore students, but also benefits you as an individual practitioner. Instructors can be asked interesting or challenging questions by students so in turn, in exploring what the answer might be, instructors learn something they might not have otherwise learnt.

Last, being an instructor and also progressing through the ranks models for students the work ethic, commitment, perseverance and courage required to overcome obstacles and to progress. An instructor who 'is in the trenches' with students, will more likely gain and maintain the respect of students. On occasion I've seen students grade beyond the rank of their instructor and leave their club, because they've outgrown the instructor and the learning and development the instructor can provide. As my own instructor once told me, achieving your 1st Dan is just the beginning of your journey, not the end.

Being an instructor is likely to limit training opportunities however, with the timing and quality of progression being trade-offs

As described, the main advantage of being an instructor while seeking to progress is deeper knowledge and wisdom in the Art of Taekwon-Do. And as suggested above, the data suggests that on the face of it, being an instructor does not inhibit progression through the ranks.

However, the data above does not determine whether there is a quality or timeliness trade-off to progression, that otherwise may not be present for non-instructors. When balancing instructing and progression, instructors may, for example, take longer to progress between ranks, or, not present themselves in the best shape they could when grading. Every choice or action has a trade-off that needs to be made, given there are limited hours in each day.

Based on my own experience, being an instructor does restrict the time I have to train, and more recently, has impacted on the timing of my progression. In my own experience, I have a family and busy children to prioritise, a career that means I work well beyond the normal 40 hour week, and when based in Wellington a large club to run, among other things. I, like many others, also choose to contribute to the organisation in a number of ways, such as running tournaments and being a Director on the Board. I have spent many weekends over the years preparing students to grade to black belt. Thus, being an instructor has meant making choices in recent times that prioritised my family and students over my own progression.

In summary

There may be a perception among students, particularly women given the lower number of women instructing, that being an instructor does hinder personal progression. On the face of the evidence, this perception does not represent the reality - being an instructor does not hinder progression. However, there is likely to be a positive bias in the data – those that can instruct and progress, without significant personal trade-off, do. I have oft heard from non-instructors that they are not willing to take on an instructor role because they fear it will mean they cannot train and progress. This may be true for some people given other priorities. There is not data available that tells us how many people actively choose not to instruct in the first place, because it would hinder their progression.

But for those that can, instructing can help with progression and progression makes you a better instructor. There is a mutually beneficial relationship between instructing and progression. And both are achievable, even if at times there are compromises, sacrifices and trade-offs that will need to be made. Pursuing either path separately can be rewarding, but pursuing both paths together is will enlighten and enrich your life and those around you. And as the General supposes, pursuing both paths is entirely necessary.