

Information for parents and teachers

Stages of learning

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Students, when they are learning to master a particular task or academic skill, usually pass through a predictable series of stages of learning. In the beginning the student is usually uncertain and unsure as he or she is introduced to the new task or skill. The student needs lots of practice and teacher feedback to become more confident, more accurate and more fluent in performing the task or skill.

The following stages of learning can be thought of as a hierarchy in the learning process.

The Acquisition stage is when the student is "learning it". This is when the student is acquiring a new skill and the teacher is aiming for accurate responses from the student. The student is learning to initiate the task, prepare for the task and terminate the task. Teaching strategies to use include small step instruction, consistent modelling/demonstration and prompting.

The Maintenance stage is when the student "uses it routinely". This stage requires that the student demonstrate the retention of skills over time. The skill is usually not perfect but is good enough to use with a degree of independence. This applies to skills that are no longer receiving specific instruction. Some skills are naturally maintained as the student on a daily basis practices them. For other skills, maintenance needs to be planned (for example, spelling skills). The adage "practice makes perfect" applies to this stage.

The Proficiency or fluency stage is when the student needs to "make it faster and better". The student must demonstrate accuracy and speed, but the quality of the skill at this level still needs improvement. A student who takes all day to complete a task is not demonstrating proficiency. Lots of independent practice is needed at this stage.

The Generalisation stage is when the student "uses it anywhere and whenever it is needed". The stage requires skills to be demonstrated in situations other than those in which the skills were taught. Generalisation is more likely to occur if

teachers are careful that the skills they teach do not become situation specific. Skills need to be presented in different situations or environments, using different materials and by different people.

Teachers and family members need to use instructional strategies that match a student's stage of learning a given skill. Usually a teaching plan needs to be established that outlines what the teacher does, what is expected of the student, and that defines and controls the context of the task or activity. Sometimes the teaching plan may not be so structured and will be less formal and more spontaneous.

Reference: Snell, M. E. (1993). (Ed.). Instruction of students with severe disabilities. Sydney: Maxwell Macmillan International.

For more Information

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