

10-22-2018

Swimming Uphill: Moving on Far from Treading Water

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Recommended Citation

Roelandt, Filip (2018) "Swimming Uphill: Moving on Far from Treading Water," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*: Vol. 11: No. 2, Article 29.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/ijare.11.02.29>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare/vol11/iss2/29>

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Swimming Uphill – Moving on Far from Treading Water
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The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognised that every child should learn to swim as a life skill. Which swimming stroke to learn first is not the most important question (Stallman, 2014). What is important, however, is to teach children to learn a technique where they feel safe. Using the principles of motor development and providing safety in and around the water are paramount. Thanks to this knowledge basis, gathered in part at the 2014 Lifesaving Foundation Conference, swimming lessons in Flemish schools (Belgium) were given a new focus. Through a compulsory curriculum, all children up to the age 12 work on two important goals in their swimming program.

Orca Certification measures 'water safety and swimming skills' consisting of propulsion with the legs, the arms, on the front and on the back. Furthermore breath control, agility, control of rotation (full range of motion), streamlining position and control of floating on the back and front are acquired. This is our primary objective; the acquisition of competitive swimming strokes is a secondary objective. The first goal of Orca Certification is achieved through a new three stage teaching program: a process beginning with 'water familiarisation' through 'survival in deep water' ending with 'water safety and swimming skills'. Our teaching of survival skills in the deep end is particularly noteworthy. The distinction between 'water familiarisation' and 'survival in deep water' can be described as follows: 'water familiarisation' is usually practised in the shallow end of the pool whereas learning to survive is practised in the deep end.

With the 'survival in the deep' stage, a basic principle remains for each teacher: the more we focus on deep water experiences in each lesson, the quicker the child becomes familiar, comfortable, and confident with deep water. In order to work as environment-specific as possible, it is important to clearly know and accentuate the differences between locomotion on land and in water. The motor skills of the child are optimally combined in their new environment so that new specific habits develop in the deep end. More efficient habits are 'learned' and replace 'less effective habits' (e.g., retro flexion of the head, hand or arm flexions, and resistance to buoyancy and unstable situations).

We use new equipment in the deep end to achieve an ideal and safe learning environment. These include moveable platforms at the bottom of the pool allowing shallow parts to rise; handgrips on the wall, leading step by step to the bottom; and easy to grip taut ropes on the surface, which bridge deep parts of the pool. This didactic approach is child-friendly, inviting, and challenging.

In addition to the adaptations in the swimming pool, instructors must keep their instructions straight forward and easy to understand. This is why all drills have been logically structured. Drills create an efficient framework for children, so

that appropriate experiences are gained. Empirically these adaptations are based on three particular parts of the body:

1. the head (dipping),
2. the torso (keep horizontal) and
3. the limbs (efficient use of).

In Flanders we call these body parts our three fundamental building blocks. If we focus upon one building block at a time, the task becomes simple and we work at the level of 'water familiarisation'. If two building blocks are practised simultaneously (e.g. head and torso), the tasks become more difficult and we reach the level of "survival in the deep". Combining and practising three building blocks bring us to the level of 'water safety and swimming skills'. This is the first objective of swimming education in primary schools: we've reached Orca Certification.

These three building blocks are present in all exercises and at every level, although always in different relationships. In each building block we focus on simple and clear instructions and the ability to provide effective exercises. In other words, how do we determine the level of difficulty in the exercises for the head, the torso and the limbs? Each drill is expressed in a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (proficient). These three parameters provide a three-part and unique combination of numbers and allow us to keep a numerical record of exercises and their levels of difficulty. This is a useful measuring tool, used in the design of instructional programs, learning curves, the screening of training courses and licences. Ultimately, this approach provides clarity and guidance for our teachers.



Filip Roelandt is a swimming expert in Flanders and teaches at Ghent University and University College Ghent. He is the founder of the Flemish expertise platform "learning to swim" and chairman of the expert group "Baan Vier." This group of four Flemish swimming experts in 2014 developed a new vision for Flemish swimming methodology by stressing that water safety must have greater importance in young children. Together they developed broad-based swimming methods that form the content of the book, *Swimming Must Be Safe and Simple*. In 2015, under supervision from the Belgian Minister of Sports and the Minister of Education, new swimming certificates were officially associated with this method.