

What do you do when you're not making progress?©

I doubt that there is a pilot flying who has not at one time or another felt the twinge of doubt that his learning curve is not going well. The emotions involved can run the gamut, self doubt, blame, resentment, and anger. Quit, seek support, change instructors, and kick the dog are typical initial reactions.

We begin expecting that flying will be much as we have seen it in the media and read in books. We often assume that our prior experience and even expertise in another field will transfer into flying and expedite the learning process. Not so. A very important part of learning to fly is to unlearn all the preconceptions we have acquired since childhood. It is very difficult to overcome first learned ideas. We are very used to adding power to go faster. Yet, just adding power to an airborne airplane makes it go slower. Pointing an airplane up does not mean that it is going or will go up. Instinctive reactions can be very dangerous when applied to flying airplanes. Illusions exist and will be believed by even the best of pilots.

Much of the difficulty in giving flight instruction arises from communication problems. The instructor has acquired an experience 'bank' from his own training and teaching. The instructor's problem is to fit his knowledge and presentation of it into your learning requirements. The student is not a blank slate. As the previous paragraph indicates the student is loaded with flying information. The student doesn't know what he doesn't know. What he knows he knows may be all the way from totally correct in concept and application to just the opposite and anywhere in between.

This is the 'playing field' of flight instruction. The student and instructor must communicate information and understanding back and forth. This communication can be verbal, demonstration, emotional and even extra-sensory. Instructors want every student to be a successful student. Every student wants to succeed. When it doesn't work out it is most often a failure to communicate.

Failure Area # 1

The student and instructor must enter into the program realizing that learning to fly has certain parameters that can make the process either easier or harder. Obviously, the more time, money and resources available the better. A weakness in any of these areas is going to affect both instruction, communication, and learning. Over half of all flight students never complete their flight training. The student would be well advised never to start with any of these parts showing deficiency. The instructor performs a disservice to the student and flying by starting a someone who is ill prepared and qualified to finish.

Failure Area # 2

Flying is learned best by total immersion. Practical limits prevent most people from this process. The result is a compromise by doing what is possible. Less time, less money, and less communication results in less progress. At some point the student and instructor will recognize that the process is breaking down. Lessons decrease in frequency. Repetition creates a sense of no progress. Frustration affects both the student and instructor. The instructor starts pushing, the student feels even more pressured. Unhappiness.

Failure Area # 3

In the beginning the instructor will accept as normal a wide variation in performance. Everything seems to be progressing fine. Then, little by little the tolerance levels are narrowed. Altitude, headings, airspeeds, trim, and attitudes are going through changes leading to landings. Mistakes happen, are created, and are resolved in the process so that safety is not compromised. Student radio exposure increases. During this period student overload often occurs. The failure of a basic skill can bring progress to a halt.

Almost any basic skill can be responsible for requiring a basics refresher flight or two. Airspeed awareness in climb, turns, cruise, and descent have parameters that are essential to safety. Banking limits along with heading interceptions must be performed within relatively narrow limits. Anticipation takes the place of reaction. The time of performance is important many aspects of flight cannot be unduly delayed in the airport pattern know what to do, when and do it. Hesitation, delay, uncertainty, or mistakes must become a non-factor. Any lack of progress requires going back to basic procedures at altitude.

Failure Area # 4

The instructor is beginning to feel the responsibility that goes with student solo. There are relatively few situations where responsibility for life and safety exposure exceeds that of a flight instructor. The student, too, is feeling this pressure from the instructor and is having mental and emotional qualms as the solo day nears. The flying culture has attached far too much emphasis on the solo. While it is indeed a significant step, it really means a change in the number of instructors. The solo student is his own instructor. Where the student fails to plan, take responsibility, practice, and study he fails as an instructor. Progress will plateau just at the time it should accelerate.

Failure Area # 5

When a student is not making expected progress it is up to the instructor to come up with a plan. More frequent flights, more elaborate ground instruction, a revised procedure, a different airport, and partial panel to change visual focus. Don't keep beating the same process when it's not working. Get some variety into the lessons. The instructor may suggest experiments to find how the mental process may be misdirecting the physical performance. Maybe the instructor should demonstrate more frequently. Just perhaps, there is no solution for the existing problem between the student and instructor. Take a week off to concentrate on book work instead of flying. Get the written out of the way. The progress may be revitalized by contradictory actions. Taking a week off from flying and study can act as a refresher. Flying three days in a row has been known to get things going again. Just go together for an airplane ride. Every instructor will have his share of failures. Learn to live with this probability.