

Instructional flights: how



The thermal soaring season seems to start earlier every year in the UK, so it's time to brush up your flying skills. Whatever you want to learn your instructor is the key. Debb Evans (left) has some tips for making the most of this invaluable training aid

WELL, the Christmas decorations are back in the attic, I've seen snowdrops and have stopped lighting my wood-burner every night – all sure signs that the soaring season is on the way. Okay, it might be a few more weeks before we see any really booming thermal days, but they are getting closer. So with that in mind, it's time to sharpen up your gliding skills so that when the sky beckons, you can respond. But before you grab the first instructor you see and jump in a glider – think about who you're taking with you. Over the past year, I have seen an amazing difference in my own performance, depending on which instructor I've flown with. With some, I have seemed to fly okay but left the glider feeling demoralised and under-confident. On the other hand I've climbed in with instructors and not expected much, but left feeling pretty good about my ability to improve. From this I've come to understand how important it is to be focused about your instructional flying, and here are my top tips.

Photo: Peter Atkinson

Know what you want to achieve

There's no point taking an instructor up flying if you aren't clear about why you're doing it. Chances are if you don't articulate it, the instructor will be really helpful but probably end up helping you with either his hot topic for the month, or with the first thing he sees you do that needs polish. You have to go into an instructional flight with a goal, an agenda. If you don't know why you're flying with an instructor, then perhaps you're wasting his or her time. Allan Black, who is the CFI for Angus and Drumshade GC agrees, and says he likes it when a student is focussed because "it not only demonstrates that they see a need for assistance but are more importantly aware of their limitations." The exception is sometimes pre-solo students, where instructors look at a record card and the conditions on the day and decide what's best. Instructors play a supportive, crucial part in any glider pilot's development and most are really great teachers, but they're not psychic – they can't look at you and "just know" what you need.

Devoting some thought before the flight to what you want to get out of it can make the difference between a wasted launch and a flight that gets you closer to fulfilling your gliding dreams



Communicate with your instructor

It's all very well to know what you want to achieve, but if the instructor doesn't, they can't help you get there. Take five minutes to explain what you're after, and why. Stafford Lintott, the DCFI at Channel GC, says: "Unfortunately a great many instructors will not maximise the full potential of a check flight – especially aerotows – for instance a check flight can be used to practise and work through some Bronze requirements. We need to know what to achieve and plan the flight accordingly." You have to be clear and concise so they can work out the best way to help you reach your goal. For instance, imagine asking an instructor for a simple check ride, as you haven't flown solo for a while. You could reasonably expect some safety checks like

cable breaks, possibly spin recovery and landing with too much or too little height. But most suppose the reason you hadn't flown solo for a while was that you'd scared yourself or had lost confidence for some reason. Most instructors would treat you a little differently then, but only if you told them. Stafford also thinks we shouldn't be overly concerned with flying solo all the time. "It is important to remember that 'off checks' does not mean no dual flying from now on, or the bare minimum; much more can be achieved and a high standard reached if the pupil has a mix of solo and dual training. It is easy to form bad habits and in some cases scare yourself and lose confidence. It is vital that all pupils continue post-solo training and fly regularly with an instructor. Going solo is only the beginning, not the end, of training."

to make the most of them

Be picky with personality

Okay, this is a touchy one. Let me start by saying that, having got airborne at several sites over the past six years, I have flown with some great people in the back seat. There have also been a few that I genuinely enjoy having a beer with, but wouldn't necessarily always want to fly with. And that's all right. Plenty of instructors would rather avoid my company in the front seat. There are naturally some people we get on with in certain situations. For example, I like instructors who are quite chatty, but don't bang on all the time. Too much silence unnerves me when I'm flying, as I like to be encouraged from the back seat. But plenty of other people prefer to be left in silence to concentrate. So pick someone you know you're compatible with: not only will you probably fly better and learn more, you'll have more fun.

Strive for consistency

This can be easier said than done, especially at bigger clubs. If you fly with more than one instructor, you'll find that each one has different traits. Some will pick up on things that others miss, others will focus on certain things, and quite often you'll be taught to do something one way, then get told to do it differently by another instructor. Without doubt, some want perfect, precise flying, while others are more concerned that you're safe, if not spot on. Of course, depending on the student's needs, all the characteristics mentioned above are valid. But to avoid confusion, once you've found an instructor you get on with in the sky, and who's on your wavelength, try to stick with them if possible. It's not the end of the world if you can't always fly with the same person, as quite often a different pair of eyes will spot different things. From the time I decided to get myself solo, to that first flight, I only flew with three instructors, and I think that was invaluable. All were very different personalities and I got something different from each one, but all three filled me with confidence, and I knew I could turn to each one for help if I needed to. They all brought different skills to the party, and I'm glad to say, none ran screaming from the airfield. Well, not that I saw, anyway.

Listen to what you're being told

This is really hard for me because I'm a bit of a perfectionist and under confident. The instructor is there to teach you. That means that sometimes they'll be your cheering squad, and at others, your critic. But instead of feeling your dander rise to defend your ego, listen to what you're being told and take it with you. One of the instructors I fly with most often has a great expression "listen with your ears, not your mouth".



John Horne's photograph of Paul Rice at Essex & Suffolk GC, Warmingford, neatly symbolises that instructors are a treasure – the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for P2s, whatever their goals. So do you make the most of yours?

When you're pulled up for something, don't make excuses, understand what you did wrong and learn how to correct it. Again, when they say you did well, don't argue and find fault with your own flying. By all means ask for clarification if you thought you did something poorly and the instructor disagrees, but take the compliment. Bob Fennell, the CFI at Andreas on the Isle of Man has been reminding me that instructors "have your interests at heart. They want you to succeed and one of the key ingredients of

your success is your confidence. Listen carefully to what is said and if at any time you do not understand anything that has been said, no matter how trivial it might appear to you – ASK. Any instructor worth their salt will happily go over that bit again. Don't feel a fool and try to muddle through; this does you no good, especially if things all go wrong. A clear understanding of what is to happen, has happened, or is happening saves you time and improves your confidence."