Certificated flight instructors (CFIs) are often skilled, experienced pilots. Even new instructors are vastly more experienced than first-time students. But this know-how may sometimes work against them. It can be difficult for expert practitioners to relate to beginners, and I often trot out what I call my "Ted Williams Story" when this subject comes up.

For those unfamiliar with baseball history, Ted Williams was arguably the greatest hitter of all time. Not only possessing the ideal physical attributes, Williams was also highly analytical and studied the game intensively. He hit 521 home runs during a career spanning 21 seasons, and in 1941 Williams became the last player ever to bat over .400 for an entire season.

However, and with all due respect to his memory, Ted Williams may not have been the best coach the world has seen. After retiring from baseball (and hitting a home run in his final at-bat), Williams managed the Washington Senators and Texas Rangers for four less-than-spectacular seasons. In a recent biography, one of his players recalled a piece of hitting advice Williams shared with the team. He said that in the earlier part of a ballgame when the pitcher was fresh and throwing hard, he would only try to
hit the top half of the ball for line drives. But in the later innings, he would aim for the bottom half of the ball to hit home runs.

This probably wasn't the best advice for hitters not destined for the Hall of Fame. As one of his players put it, "I'm going up there against Nolan Ryan, and he's throwing 95 miles per hour, and I'm trying to hit a particular half of the ball?"

While Ted Williams was fully capable of hitting whichever half of a 95 mph fastball he wanted, that's probably too much to expect from your average utility infielder. Williams had, in effect, set the standard without teaching how to achieve it. This is a trap that often afflicts flight instructors: We sometimes fail to teach methodically because we forget what it's like to be a novice.

“Hold straight and level”, we tell the student. OK. How?

Experienced pilots hold straight and level without thinking about it very much. But we need to break down the skill for a beginner. Where should she look? Which controls should be used? With how much force should the controls be manipulated? Should one or two hands be used on the yoke? For that matter, have we even bothered to define what straight and level means?

Breaking down complex skills into component parts requires us to think from the point of view of a beginner. It’s great when a student has the “knack” and picks things up simply by watching us demonstrate, but not everyone will have that ability. We must give specific, methodical instructions, and be careful not to assume knowledge on the part of the student.

Another part of our experience that sometimes works against CFI’s is that we’re not afraid of flying. New students in small aircraft, no matter how enthusiastic, often feel intimidated by the sights, sounds and sensations of flight until they learn what is normal.

The more experience we instructors rack up as pilots, the easier it is to forget how nervousness and apprehension can affect a student. I was reminded of this recently when I ferried an airplane back to my home airport in somewhat extreme wind conditions.
I’m usually a confident pilot in wind, but at nearly 40 knots and in a very lightly loaded aircraft, it felt like I was flying before I’d even started the engine. The takeoff was raucous, and as I departed the pattern I wondered if I had made a mistake taking off into this situation. I eventually landed safely and put the airplane in the hangar before a tree could fall on it. But I later reflected that while this was the first time in years I had felt uncomfortable in an airplane, new students sometimes feel this way even in smooth air.

Instructors need to remember that although intensity of experience is useful for learning, outright fear is not. The engine is loud, the plane moves in ways they’ve never seen on an airliner, and everything is new and unfamiliar. Instructors must work to expand students’ limits, but we can't expect too much too soon either.

I’m glad for the occasional wake-up call like my windy ferry flight. It's good for instructors to feel a little uneasy in the airplane from time to time because it puts us in the shoes of our students. Aerobatics, tailwheel training, or anything unfamiliar is useful for keeping us mindful of what students are experiencing.

Did I mention Ted Williams was also a Marine Corps pilot? He was an instructor toward the end of World War II, and flew Grumman Panther jets in the Korean War. But most of our students aren’t going to be like Ted Williams, so if we want our students to get the “right stuff”, we need to be prepared to teach it to them step by step.