

ASPECTS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING VERBS OF PERCEPTION

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Abstract: *The present research takes a practical and methodological approach to verbs of perception with a focus on some specific characteristics of the basic perception verbs, paying special attention to the difference between active and passive perception. It aims at investigating the difficulties that students face when studying perception verbs and applying grammar rules. The study applies qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine learners' deviations in the use of perception verbs. The analysis of students' errors reveals that it is difficult for learners to identify the main differences between the three types of perception verbs: those denoting actions, perceptions and properties.*

Keywords: *perception verbs, classification, active and passive perception, language teaching*

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Introduction

Academic studies on perception verbs have been conducted in a variety of languages: English and Russian (Rylina, 2013), English and Vietnamese (Oanch, 2016), English and Spanish (MacArthur, Krennmayr & Littlemore, 2015; Rojo & Valenzuela, 2005), English and Arabic (Jumaah, Rashid, Jabar & Ali, 2020), English, Spanish and Basque (Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 1997, 1999), English and Portuguese (Santos, 2006), English and Chinese (Li, 2013; Yu, 2004, 2008), Bulgarian and Polish (Mihailova, 2001), English, French and Romanian (Neagu, 2013), English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Hungarian (Galac, 2020). A lot of research has been focused on the contrastive analysis of the meanings of perception verbs in different languages. However, little attention has been paid to the practical aspect of teaching perception verbs. Most course books and grammar books¹ in English such as *MacMillan English Grammar in Context Advanced* (Vince, 2008), *FCE Use of English 1* (Evans, 2014), *Advanced Grammar in Use*. (Hewings, 2005), *Ready for First* (Norris, 2013), *Enterprise Grammar 3* (Evans & Dooley, 2011), etc., focus on the contrast between dynamic and stative verbs. They put an emphasis on rare occurrences in the progressive form of stative verbs as they represent a state which does not involve a notion of movement toward completion. Verbs denoting passive perception verbs are presented in contrast to active perception verbs, which involve an activity by the subject.

Research questions

This paper touches on some practical aspects of developing lexical and grammatical competence with regard to perception verbs. The main aim of the present research is to investigate students' linguistic competence with regard to the use of perception verbs. Therefore, the article attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties Bulgarian first-year students with little prior knowledge of the language face regarding perception verbs?
2. Are the difficulties related mainly to applying grammar rules or do they stem from lexical incompetence?

Participants and data collection

The corpus of the study contains two tasks done by 20 non-specialist first-year students with limited prior knowledge of the language. Given the fact that perception verbs are not extensively covered in the lower levels of English course books some problems were expected to be observed. During the course, prior to doing the test, students' attention was drawn to the main characteristics of

1. The sources of language material are listed in the Reference section.

the different types of perception verbs (presented below) and the grammar rules which apply to using them, paying special attention to the difference between active and passive perception. At the end of the semester, students were asked to do a short test, which consisted of two tasks, containing the basic verbs of perception. Since the participants were in their beginner level of learning the language, only the basic perception verbs were used in the test.

Methods

The study applies qualitative and quantitative error analysis to identify and examine learners' deviations in the use of perception verbs. According to Richards et al. (1992) error analysis is essential in that it helps identifying the sources of errors and obtaining information on difficulties in language learning with the aim to improve the teaching-learning process. The main problems that the target group of students face were identified as a result of a two-step procedure: first the types of errors were identified and classified in four major categories, and second, quantitative analysis was conducted.

Teaching verbs of perception

The fact that cognitive verbs may occur in the progressive often makes it difficult for students to choose between the simple and the progressive form of the verb in sentences such as:

1. The food **tastes/ is tasting** delicious.

Viberg's typological study of perception verbs provides a useful framework to present the differences between verbs of perception which can be categorized into three types depending on the semantic roles played by their subjects (see Viberg, 1984). In (1) the speaker reports on what is perceived, and the subject is not a perceiver (Aneva, 2020). To make it more easily comprehensible, students' attention can be drawn to the difference between the three groups of verbs of perception as follows:

Group A (active):	Group B (non-active):	Group C (non-active):
listen to	hear	sound
look at	see	look
smell	smell	smell
taste	taste	taste
touch	feel	feel

Group A verbs specify that the perceiver is "focusing" on a specific object. The verbs in this group can be used in the progressive.

2. Kelly is **listening to** her teacher carefully.
3. John is **looking at** you.
4. She is **smelling** the roses (= she is sniffing).

The three sentences indicate that the subject is performing the action. Moreover, the verbs describe a volitional process.

Group B verbs specify general perception and are non-progressive.

5. He **hears** a noise. (Not “He is hearing a noise.”)
6. I **see** it. (Not “I am seeing it.”)
7. Every morning when I wake up I **smell** coffee coming from the kitchen. (Not “I am smelling coffee.”)

Despite the fact that the verbs in sentences (5), (6), (7) above present actions happening at the time of speaking, using the progressive form would be completely wrong because the subject is not intentionally performing an activity, i.e. these verbs indicate that the subject perceives something without focusing their attention on the action. For better clarification sentence (7) can be paraphrased in “Every morning when I wake up I can feel the scent of coffee coming from the kitchen.” Consequently, in the case of “smell” in the Simple Tense the accent is on the feeling, whereas in the progressive form the emphasis is on the physical performance.

It should be taken into account, however, that when “feel” is used to describe emotions, the progressive is sometimes used. Hall (2003, p. 25) suggests that some verbs of perception can be used in both the simple and the progressive form without change in meanings:

8. I **feel** good. Or I **am feeling** good.

“See” is another verb that can sometimes be used in expressions in the progressive but with a difference in meaning.

9. The doctor **we’ve been seeing** has our records.
10. I’m **seeing** a friend.
11. They’ve **been seeing** each other for a month.

In the three examples the verb “see” does not mean visually perceive but bears the meaning of “meet” or “have a relationship with someone.”

Group C verbs refer to appearance and could be replaced by the verb “seem” and are non-progressive. This group includes the descriptive perception verbs. Scovel (1971, p. 83) calls them resultative verbs because they are verbal actions which are clearly the result of state of using a sense organ. Consider the following examples:

12. It **sounds** great.
13. They **look** bad.
14. It **smells** awful.

In all of the sentences above, the verbs “sounds”, “look” and “smells” describe the person’s awareness of the quality of what is heard, seen or smelled.

Another method that can make perception verbs more easily comprehensible for students is to study and focus learners’ attention on the distinction between experiencer-based (activity and experience) and source-based (percept/ copulative) verbs of perception (Viberg, 1983).

The grammatical subject of experiencer-based perception verbs is the perceiver and they emphasize the perceiver’s role in the act of perception. These verbs always require an object, i.e. a necessary condition is the presence of an object of the perceptual act. They can be further subdivided into [activity](#) and [experience](#) perception verbs. The [activity](#) perception verbs signify an intended act of perception:

15. I really **listened** to the sound of my violin. It was such a terrible noise.
16. He turned on the radio and **listened** to the local news.
17. Karen **smelled** the flower with delight.
18. He **is tasting** the sauce.

In sentences (15) and (16), the subject intended to listen to the sound of the violin or the radio and in (17) Karen intentionally smelled the flower. In sentence (18) the verb “taste” refers to “put [food](#) or [drink](#) in [your mouth](#) to [find](#) out what [flavour](#) it has”, as suggested by Cambridge Dictionary. In such special circumstances, one may assume that state verbs have been changed into active verbs.

On the other hand, [experience perception verbs](#) do not express voluntary activities, i.e. they describe a non-intended act of perception. As in:

19. I **heard** a noise coming from behind me.
20. Karen **tasted** the garlic in the soup.

In (19), one can hear something without intentionally listening to it. The same is true for (20), where Karen can distinguish the characteristic flavour of the garlic. They are simply acts of perception that the performer of the action naturally experiences without any volition on the part of the subject.

The grammatical subject of source-based (percept/ copulative) verbs (Viberg, 1983) is the object of perception and the agent of perception is sometimes wholly absent from the [sentence](#). These verbs, unlike experiencer-based, are not followed by an object. These verbs refer to making an assessment concerning the state of the object of perception, and are often used evidentially:

21. Your mother **looks** very young.
- 21 a. Your mother **appears to be** very young.
22. This sandwich **tastes** delicious (= it has a delicious flavor).

The speaker reports on what is perceived here, and neither “your mother” nor “the sandwich” are perceivers. The meaning of perception becomes obvious if the verb “look” (21) is replaced with the verb “appear” (21 a).

Practical aspects

Non-active (experience) perception verbs, described in Group 2 (“hear”, “see”, “smell”, “taste”, “feel”), share some characteristics:

- They are often used with the auxiliary verb “can”:

23. **Can** you **hear** what I am saying?

24. I **can see** you.

25. You **can taste** the chilli in the dish but it is a little sweet.

It is interesting to note that, in (23), (24) avoiding the use of the modal verb does not change the interpretation of the sentences since their meaning is not focused on the ability of the speaker to hear or see. This is especially noticeable in (23), which could be transformed to *Do you hear what I am saying?* The modal verb is used when the speaker refers to what can be seen, heard, etc., at the moment (Evans & Dooley, 2011). In (25) the construction [can + taste] is used to describe the act of recognizing the flavour of the dish.

- Experience perception verbs are not used in the progressive form, unlike verbs which express voluntary actions (“look (at)”, “listen (to)”):

26. I **hear** what you’re saying

27. I **am listening to** you, for whatever that’s worth.

However, when expressing voluntary actions, they can be used in the progressive form:

28. I **can see** a light in the distance. (involuntary), (= I can actually see).
Are you seeing your brother tomorrow? (voluntary), (= Are you meeting your brother tomorrow?).

29. This scarf **feels** like silk. (involuntary), (= it has the texture of).

30. Mum **is feeling** Jo’s forehead. (voluntary), (= she is touching).

31. This sandwich **tastes** delicious. (involuntary), (= it has a good flavour).

32. She **is tasting** the sauce to see if it’s OK. (voluntary), (= she is tasting the flavour).

- Most grammar books (Evans, 2014; Hewings, 2005; Vince, 1998, 2003) focus on two general structures of verbs of perception with other verbs. There is usually a difference of meaning between the two structures.

1. Subject + Verbs of perception + Object + Bare infinitive

This pattern suggests an activity which is completed. The **bare infinitive** is used after these verbs when the doer of hearing/ seeing hears or sees the whole action or event.

33. I **saw** Helen **take** the wallet from your bag yesterday.

34. I **heard** her **sing** a lovely song.

These two examples could be interpreted as follows: I was there, Helen put her hand in your bag and took out your wallet. I saw everything (33); I sat listening, she started singing a song and I listened to her until she finished it (34).

In both sentences the speaker reports seeing and respectively hearing the completed action, i.e. the verbs “take” and “sing” imply the meaning of completeness. It is important to remember that the bare infinitive is not used with the verbs “taste”, “smell” or “touch”. However, it can be used with “feel”. Consider the following examples:

35. I can **feel** his heart **beating** slowly.

36. I **felt** him **shudder**.

37. Do you **smell** something **burning**?

In the case of the verb “smell” it is always followed by an -ing form, as it is a momentary registering of a process in the course of its happening.

2. Subject + Verbs of perception + Object + ing-form

This pattern suggests an activity in progress. The **-ing form** is used to suggest that we hear an action or event in progress.

38. I saw Jane crossing the street this morning.

In sentence (38) the speaker reports seeing Jane while crossing the street, i.e. the speaker did not witness the whole process but only part of it so the action is incomplete.

39. I **heard** her **singing** a song as I walked past her room.

A possible interpretation of sentence (39) is: When I heard her, she was singing a song. She might have been in the middle of her singing and I didn't hear the whole song.

Another usage of the **-ing form** after verbs of perception suggests repetition:

40. I **saw** him **throwing** stones at the dogs. (= He kept throwing stones.)

It is important to bear in mind that after these verbs possessive forms cannot be used with an **-ing form**:

41. I saw **Peter getting** out of the train. (NOT: *I saw Peter's getting out of the train.)

Van der Meer (1994) explains the difference between bare-infinitive and the ing-construction as an opposition of Static vs. Dynamic respectively (1994, p. 477). He distinguishes the ing-construction (39) as a static one, since it presents "a frozen picture", while pointing out that the bare infinitive complement (34) bears more Dynamic characteristics and indicates simultaneous actions.

3. Subject + Verbs of perception + Object + Past participle

Visual and auditory perception verbs ("see", "hear", "watch", "notice", etc.), can also be followed by an **object + past participle** as in:

42. I **heard** my name **repeated** several times. (= My name was repeated several times.)

While in the passive form, the bare infinitive is replaced by the to-infinitive:

43. They were **heard to sing** something.

All the examples above illustrate that there are some restrictions to passive forms with perception verbs. Felser (1998) explains these grammatical restrictions with the fact that verbs of perception behave as control verbs.

- Verbs denoting passive perception, in contrast to active perception verbs, cannot be used in the imperative as in the following examples:

44. **Look**, but **don't touch**.

This is not the case with the verb "hear", denoting passive perception, which can be used in the imperative instead of "listen". Consider the following examples:

45. **Listen** to me, Georges.

45 a. **Hear** me, Georges.

Although hearing in the physical sense is a part of the whole process, both verbs are used to attract the listener's attention.

- Perception verbs are modified by adjectives. Consider the following examples:

46. The roses in the vase look beautiful.

46 a. *The roses in the vase look beautifully.

In their desire to actively master English grammar foreign learners strictly apply the rule to pair verbs with adverbs and often forget that perception verbs are modified by adjectives (46), applying the pattern S + Vp + Adj. Emphasizing the difference and paying particular attention to the role of the subject in the sentence is a way to avoid misapplying the modifier.

47. The pie in the oven **smells delicious**.

47 a. *The pie in the oven **smells deliciously**.

Using an adverbs in (47a) will mean that the pie is capable of performing an action. In (47 a) the verb “smell” describes a state rather than an action. Therefore, it should be modified by an adjective.

Data Analysis

The test consists of two tasks (see Appendix). The first one provides respondents with two options and requires them to choose the correct one. This task examines students’ ability to apply grammar rules deciding on the correct present tense form and examines their aptness to choose the simple or progressive form of the perception verbs in fifteen sentences. The types of errors made are presented in the following table:

Table 1.
Types of students’ errors in Task 1

N	Classification of errors	Total N sentences	Correct answers	Incorrect answers	Percentage of errors
1.	Expressing activity/ process	9	117	63	35%
2.	Different meaning of the perception verb	3	42	18	30%
3.	Influence of adverbs of time	5	20	80	80%

The analysis of the results shows that 30% of the students face challenges to notice the different meanings that the verbs denote and as a result apply grammar rules incorrectly (e.g. I **don’t see** anything./ I **am not seeing** anything.), while 35% find difficulty identifying the type of action that perception verbs denote (e.g. This soup **is tasting** good./ This soup **tastes** good).

Most of the errors refer to the use of the incorrect forms of the verbs according to the tense. The highest percentage of the incorrect answers is 80% in the sentences which contain adverbs of time. These results indicate that students face difficulty using perception verbs and are easily misled in the presence of adverbs and adverb phrases in the sentence, focusing on the progressive form of the verb

and overlooking other rules (e.g. Bernard **looks** healthy this week./ Bernard **is looking** healthy this week.) This could be considered as incomplete applications of rules and a possible factor for this could be overgeneralization, which refers to the incorrect application of the previously learned material regarding Simple and Progressive tenses. Since the participants are in their beginners' stage of learning English, they tend to focus on applying grammar rules regarding the Present Progressive tense, which is widely practised in the A1, A2 levels, overlooking the rules regarding perception verbs. Another possible explanation is the emphasis on grammar tenses in the lower levels of English, which draws learners to look for key words used in Progressive tenses.

The second task, in which students have performed better is focused on the inductive way of studying language and grammar. It is designed to evaluate students' ability to define the action described by perception verbs as voluntary or involuntary in 12 sentences.

Table 2.
Types of students' errors in Task 2

N	Classification of errors	Total N sentences	Correct answers	Incorrect answers	Percentage of errors
1.	Activity and experience perception verbs.	12	180	60	25%

The percentage of the incorrect responses is 25%, which is the lowest in both tasks. Successful completion of the task is to show that students have successfully comprehended linguistic concepts and they have successfully derived rules regarding the voluntary actions that perception verbs denote, which is of main importance when choosing the correct grammatical form. Students have performed better in this task, which is an indicator that it is easier for learners to derive concepts that perception verbs denote bearing in mind the specific context in which they appear.

Conclusion and implications

The analysis of students' answers to the two tasks reveals that students are likely to mix up the meanings and the uses of the three kinds of verbs connected to the senses. This might stem from a lack of exercises containing all three types, particularly at lower levels, which makes it difficult for students to identify the main differences between the verbs denoting actions, perceptions or properties.

Another issue that requires special attention is the fact that students are quite likely to experience problems choosing the correct simple or progressive form of the perception verb in combination with adverbs. (The meat *smells/ is*

smelling bad today). A possible explanation of students' errors in this direction is the insufficient practice in identifying the types of perception verbs and the tendency to focus on and strictly adhere to the basic tenses in the beginner levels of studying English.

The findings outlined in this paper confirm that in order to achieve the main goal of teaching English as a foreign language in its oral and written forms, it is necessary to use a special approach which takes into account the language in its actual use. This approach suggests that students' attention should be focused not only on the meanings conveyed by the verbs of perception, but also on the object of perception.

The results prove the universal connection between grammar and lexical meanings and the need to emphasize that lexical meanings are determined not only by grammar, but by the respective context they are used in.

The analysis of the results of the present research could be useful for identifying the weak areas of learning perception verbs and applying effective teaching techniques.

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Appendix

Test

Task 1. Choose the correct form.

1. My husband *is always tasting/ always tastes* the food while I'm cooking! It's very annoying.
2. This coffee *doesn't taste/ is not tasting* good this morning.
3. I *don't see / am not seeing* anything.
4. The waiter *is tasting/ tastes* the wine.
5. I *am seeing/ see* dad tomorrow.
6. Now I *see/ am seeing* what you mean.
7. The meat *smells/ is smelling* bad today.
8. Why *are you smelling/ do you smell* the soup?
9. She *is feeling/ feels* his arm on her shoulder.
10. Bernard *looks/ is looking* happy.
11. This soup *is tasting/ tastes* good.
12. This material *is feeling/ feels* like silk.

Task 2. Define the action that the words in bold denote as voluntary/ involuntary.

1. I **am seeing** Susan tonight.
2. I **can hear** the birds singing.
3. Try to tell what this is just by **feeling** it.
4. I **looked out** of the window but saw nothing.
5. Come and **see** us again soon.
6. **Are you seeing** anyone?
7. You **can taste** the chilli in the dish but it is a little sweet.
8. **Smell** this and tell me what you think it is
9. She could **hear voices** in the kitchen.
10. Come on! I **want to hear** all about it.
11. **Do you smell** something burning?
12. **Taste** this sauce and tell me if it needs seasoning.

Abbreviations:

S Subject

Vp Perception verb

Adj Adjective