A Study of Verb Inflection Usage in Sentences by EFL Students: Challenges and Trends

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Abstract

This study investigates the distribution and challenges of verb inflection usage among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Tadulako University, focusing on regular verb inflection namely the use of suffixes such as -ed, -s, -ing, and -en suffixes as well as irregular verbs such as ablaut, suppletion, and zero modification in tenses and aspects. Using a quantitative descriptive approach, data were collected through tests and questionnaires from 148 third-semester students. The analysis results show that regular verbs, especially the suffix -en, are more challenging for EFL students. Seven factors that influence the use of verb inflection were identified: 1) vocabulary limitations; 2) fear of making mistakes; 3) low motivation; 4) teaching methods and quality of instruction; 5) lack of practice; 6) classroom environment; and 7) peer influence.

Keywords: *Morphology, Inflection, Ablaut, Suppletion, Zero Modification, Verb*

INTRODUCTION

In English, constructing sentences is a fundamental skill that relies on morphology. Sentences are formed from words built using morphemes, the smallest units of meaning in a language. These morphemes, categorized as free or bound, are combined according to grammatical rules to create words, phrases, and clauses. Lieber (2009) emphasizes the critical role of morphemes as the building blocks of meaningful communication, forming the foundation of sentence construction.

Morphological processes such as inflection and derivation play a vital role in shaping words and sentences. Aronoff and Fudeman (2011) explain that inflection modifies words to indicate grammatical categories like tense, while derivation generates new words. Verbs, as key components of sentences, reflect this complexity through changes such as affixation and reduplication (Ingo, 2018). Understanding patterns like zero modification, suppletion, and ablaut is essential for mastering irregular verbs, enabling learners to use and remember them accurately, thus enhancing language proficiency.

Learning about the use of regular and irregular verbs, along with their implementation in tenses and aspects, typically begins in junior high school. Burhan (2019) found that while students

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in junior high school are generally proficient in using the simple past tense, they often struggle with the past perfect tense, suggesting that the past perfect tense presents a greater challenge. Additionally, Kuswanty, Arafah, Budiman, Ali, Fatsah, and Room (2023) highlighted that both implicit and explicit teaching methods can effectively enhance students' understanding of tenses.

However, EFL students at Tadulako University still face significant challenges in correctly changing the form of verbs according to the tense used. Common errors include forgetting to add "-ed" to regular verbs or using incorrect irregular forms. For example, students often write "I walk to school yesterday" instead of "I walked to school yesterday," or mistakenly write "goed" instead of "went." Additionally, many struggle with using the "-ing" suffix for the present progressive tense, such as writing "She is play badminton" instead of "She is playing badminton." Similarly, in the simple present tense, students tend to omit the "-s/es" suffix, writing "Rara go to school every day" instead of "Rara goes to school every day." These errors are primarily due to two factors: the simplicity of the Indonesian verb system and a lack of understanding regarding the distinction between regular and irregular verbs, as well as the appropriate use of affixes in English.

Several studies have explored inflectional morphemes, which provide valuable insights for this study. Fitria (2020) analyzed news articles from Tempo.co and found that 72.83% of the words were inflectional morphemes, with common suffixes such as "-s", "-ed", and "-ing". Similarly, Cahyono, Fafida, Prastiwi, and Fortinasari (2023) focused on the Short Story 'The Three Little Pigs' Retold by Flora Annie Steel (1922)" and identified a high frequency of verb-forming affixes such as "-ed" and "-ing," while Ifadloh, Najerin, Nufus, and Ulum (2022) examined Inflectional Morphemes in the Short Story 'The Child's Story' by Charles Dickens" and found a variety of inflectional morphemes such as plural nouns and past tense markers. These studies provide a useful framework for understanding inflectional morphemes in different contexts.

However, while those studies focused on inflectional morphemes in written texts, the current study differs by examining the use of verb tense markers in sentences produced by EFL students at Tadulako University. Unlike the previous qualitative research, this study utilizes a quantitative descriptive approach and explores both regular (suffixation) and irregular (ablaut, supplementation, and null modification) verb tenses, thus filling a gap in the existing literature regarding the challenges EFL students face when applying verb tense markers in their sentences.

METHODS

This research was conducted at Tadulako University and used descriptive quantitative methods, relying on quantitative data and statistical analysis. According to Clarke & Collier (2015), quantitative descriptive research is a systematic approach to investigating numerical data, focusing on measuring or counting attributes to describe situations or events. Data collection was done by giving tests and questionnaires. Moreover, this research focuses on verb inflection distribution by EFL students and analyzes factors that influence their difficulties in using verb inflection.

The data in this study were obtained from the third-semester students of the English education study program at Tadulako University consisting of 236 students from six parallel classes. Therefore, the researcher used the random sampling technique to determine the sample. As Agresti and Finlay (2014, p. 15) state, "Simple random sampling is a method of sampling for

which every possible sample has an equal chance of selection". Thus, the researcher collected the 148 students' papers from classes A, B, C D, E, and F as the samples for this research.

In analyzing the collected data, researchers have several stages. To analyze the test, the first stage is that the researcher separates the correct answers from the wrong answers. Second, the researcher listed the wrong answers based on the marking categories using an Excel worksheet. Third, we analyzed the frequency of wrong answers for each marking category by identifying the types of marking that consistently received wrong answers. After identifying the categories of marking that were frequently incorrect, the researcher examined which markings were consistently difficult for students in those categories.

Furthermore, besides analyzing the test, the researcher also analyzed the questionnaire. The researcher entered the questionnaire answers into the SPSS program and then sorted the SPSS results based on the theory of factors affecting student difficulties. Furthermore, suppose there is a variable that has a slight difference between agreeing and disagreeing. In this case, the researcher will determine the validity of the variable by considering it valid if there is a slight gap of more than 10% because small gaps such as 5-8% are often considered statistically insignificant in smaller samples (Samohyl, 2020). In the end, the researcher lists all the factors to see which variables are dominant.

RESULTS AND DISDISCUSSION

The data findings are based on the results of data analysis obtained through research instruments, namely tests and questionnaires. Each instrument contributes to the results thus the data analysis can answer the research questions in this study.

The Analysis of the Data Collected from the Test

The researcher collected data from the test results that were given to the students, the data collected were mainly wrong answers to analyze the types of inflectional markers that were most challenging for them. The analysis of this study focuses on the kinds of inflectional markers with the highest frequency of incorrect to show the greatest challenges experienced by EFL students in using inflectional markers, especially verb markings in tenses and aspect appropriately in their sentences.

Table 1. Frequency of the Correct and Incorrect Answers for Each Type of Verb Markings

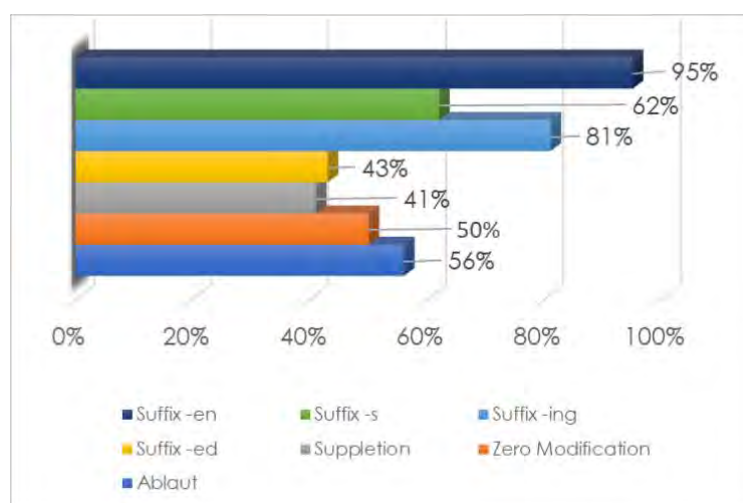| Number in Test	Types of Inflectional Markings	Correct	Incorrect
1	Ablaut	196	248
2			
3			
4	Zero Modification	220	224
5			
6			
7	Suppletion	263	181
8			
9			
10	Suffix -ed	251	193
11			
12			
13	Suffix -ing	85	359
14			
15			
16	Suffix -s	167	275
17			
18			
19	Suffix -en	24	420
20			
21			

Figure 1. Percentage of Frequency of the Incorrect Answers for
Each Type of Verb Markings

Data related to the frequency of correct and incorrect answers for the various types of verb markings can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1 above. Table 1 provides details of the number of correct and incorrect answers for each type of marking, while Figure 1 presents the percentage of students' mistakes in using each type of verb marking. The focus of this analysis is to see what types of verb markings are most challenging for EFL students.

The three questions in the **ablaut** category are *sang* (question 1), *swam* (question 2), and *drank* (question 3) Based on the data that we can see in table 1, there are 196 correct answers and 248 incorrect answers. The percentage of errors in this category is 56% based on Figure 1, which shows that students have difficulty recognizing vowel changes in irregular verbs. For example, in question number 3 (*drank*), many students failed to identify that this form is the past tense of *drink*.

This shows students' lack of understanding of the inflectional patterns of irregular verbs that use vowel changes as time markers.

Questions number 4 (cut), number 5 (hit), and number 6 (put) fall into the **zero modification** category. Out of a total of 444 answers, 220 were correct and 224 were incorrect. The percentage of incorrect answers in this category was 50%, indicating students' difficulty in recognizing that the form of certain verbs does not change even if the time changes. For example, in the question with the verb *hit* (question number 5), students may have difficulty identifying that the verb remains the same even though the time changes.

The **suppletion** category consists of *is* (question 7), *am* (question 9), and *went* (question 8). There were 263 correct answers and 181 incorrect answers in this type of marking. The percentage of incorrect answers was 41%, which is relatively lower than other types of verb markings. Verbs, like went (question 8), seem to be more easily recognized by students because they are often used in daily life. However, some of the errors that occurred for example in question number 7 (the verb *is*) indicate that students still need further understanding of verb tense changes.

For the **suffix -ed** category, the questions include *finished* (question 11), *traveled* (question 12), and *explained* (question 10). The results showed 251 correct answers and 193 incorrect answers, with an incorrect percentage of 43%. Most of the mistakes came from the lack of mastery of the regular verb pattern in the past tense. For example, in question number 12 (*traveled*), some students seemed to be confused by the use of the suffix -ed to indicate the past tense.

In this **suffix -ing** category, there are three questions: *are studying* (question 13), *was baking* (question 14), and *was reading* (question 15). Based on the data, there were only 85 correct and 359 incorrect answers, producing a high percentage of incorrect answers at 81%. For example, in the verb *baking* (question 14), the combination of the auxiliary verb and suffix -ing proved to be one of the main difficulties for students. This shows that students have considerable difficulty in understanding the function of the suffix -ing.

The questions in the **suffix -s** category included *walks* (question 16), *works* (question 17), and *plays* (question 18). In this category, there were 167 correct answers and 275 incorrect answers, with an incorrect percentage of 62%. In analyzing this category, the researcher found that students still have difficulty understanding the rule that the third-person singular subject in the present tense needs the suffix -s in the verb.

The last category is **suffix -en**, which includes *has written* (question 19), *has eaten* (question 20), and *has driven* (question 21). This category is the highest incorrect verb marking category with only 24 correct answers and 420 incorrect answers with an incorrect percentage of 95%, which makes it the most challenging verb marking for EFL students. For example, in *have eaten* (question 20), students often fail to recognize the past participle form of the verb eat. They had great difficulty with the perfect tense especially the use of suffix -en possibly due to the complexity of the structure and the use of auxiliary verbs such as "has" and "have".

The high error rate in the -en suffix category based on Figure 1, as well as the significant percentage of errors in the Present Perfect Tense, indicate that students face difficulties in recognizing the right verb form. This is caused by their limited understanding of the tenses and aspects. For example, in question number 21, the verb *"have driven"* requires recognition of the auxiliary verb "have" and the correct past participle form *"driven."* Many EFL students have difficulty identifying the auxiliary verb as a tense marker and the past participle as an aspect

marker. This is in line with the statement of Parrott (2010), who states that using the Present Perfect Tense correctly is often more difficult for students than simply understanding it. This difficulty reflects the complexity of verb inflection patterns, specifically in maintaining consistency between tense and aspect in a sentence. Therefore, the suffix category -en, especially in the Present Perfect Tense, becomes one of EFL students' most challenging verb usage.

The Analysis of the Data Collected from the Questionnaire

The researcher used a questionnaire to answer the second research question regarding the factors that influence EFL students' ability to use verb markings in their sentences. Therefore, the researcher presents a table of variables that shows what factors are dominant or influence students in using verb markings below:

Table 2. The Frequency of Students' Answers Based on the Variables

No	Variable	SA	A	D	SD
1	Vocabulary limitations	108	926	437	9
		7%	63%	29%	1%
2	Fear of Making Mistakes	401	915	155	9
		27%	62%	10%	1%
3	Low Motivation	324	1090	65	1
		22%	73%	4%	1%
4	Teaching Methods and Quality of Instruction	179	1138	160	3
		11%	77%	11%	1%
5	Lack of Practice	149	1139	190	2
		10%	76%	13%	1%
6	Classroom Environment	260	1081	129	10
		18%	72%	9%	1%
7	Peer Influence	316	951	183	30
		21%	65%	12%	2%

The researcher analyzed the students' responses to each indicator on each variable in depth. The focus of this analysis was to look at the percentage of mainly disagree responses (a combination of 'disagree' and "strongly disagree") to the statements presented as all statements were positive. From the eight potential factors that might influence students' ability to use verb markings, it was found that seven factors have a dominant influence. These seven factors are vocabulary limitations (variable 2), fear of making mistakes (variable 3), low motivation (variable 4), teaching methods and quality of instruction (variable 5), lack of practice (variable 6), classroom environment (variable 7), and peer influence (variable 8).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the use of verb markings, especially the suffix -en is the most challenge for EFL students. This is evident from the 420 wrong answers found in the students' answers. The researcher concluded that EFL students still struggle to use the suffix -en correctly, especially in applying it to the appropriate tenses and aspects in their sentences. The most dominant mistake occurred on the verb "has driven", with 146 incorrect answers on question number 21 in the test. This error shows that they experienced confusion in recognizing the past participle form

and its use in sentences, especially in the context of more complex tenses such as present perfect and past perfect.

In addition, the researcher identified factors that influence students' difficulties in using verb markings. These factors are divided into internal and external factors. Based on the analysis of the questionnaire, seven main factors influence the mastery of tenses, thus impacting students' ability to use verb markings effectively. These factors are 1) vocabulary limitations; 2) fear of making mistakes; 3) low motivation; 4) teaching methods and quality of instruction; 5) lack of practice; 6) classroom environment; and 7) peer influence.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A
1. The written test for students

A. Fill in the blanks with the correct verb form based on the context provided.

   1. The students _____ (to sing) beautifully during the performance.

   2. They _____ (to swim) in the lake last summer.

   3. They _____ (to drink) all the juice yesterday.

   4. I _____ (to cut) the vegetables while she was preparing the sauce.

   5. We _____ (to hit) the ball during the game.

   6. They _____ (to put) the books on the shelf.

   7. He _____ (to be) very tired after the long journey.

   8. We _____ (to go) to the park last week.

   9. I _____ (to be) very excited about the trip next week.

   10. The teacher _____ (to explain) the lesson last week.

   11. He _____ (to finish) three chapters of his book this morning.

   12. They _____ (to travel) to Japan last summer.

   13. They _____ (to study) for their exams at the moment.

   14. She _____ (to bake) a cake when her kids came inside.

   15. She _____ (to read) a book when the phone rang.

   16. She _____ (to walk) to school every day.

   17. Nana _____ (to work) in a bank every Tuesday.

   18. He _____ (to play) the guitar in the evening.

19. She _____ (to write) several articles for the magazine since she graduated from college.

20. We _____ (to eat) breakfast for the past two weeks.

21. He _____ (to drive) the same car for ten years before buying a new one.

Appendix B

No	Pernyataan	SS	S	TS	STS
		4	3	2	1
Variable 1					
1	Saya merasa mudah memahami dan menerapkan aturan tense dalam bahasa Inggris				
2	Saya merasa percaya diri menggunakan semua bentuk kata kerja yang kompleks secara benar				
3	Saya memahami dengan baik perbedaan antara bentuk kata kerja beraturan dan tidak beraturan				
4	Saya mampu memecahkan masalah tata bahasa yang rumit				
5	Saya merasa kemampuan kognitif saya mendukung pemahaman tata bahasa				
6	Saya cepat menguasai aturan tense baru				
7	Saya merasa mudah memahami struktur kalimat yang rumit				
8	Saya memahami dengan baik serta mampu menjelaskan konsep ablaut dan zero modification kepada orang lain				
9	Saya tidak kesulitan mengidentifikasi kesalahan dalam penggunaan tense				
10	Saya bisa menerapkan aturan tense dalam berbagai konteks dengan baik				
Variable 2					
11	Saya memiliki kosakata yang luas untuk				

	menggunakan bentuk kata kerja yang tepat				
12	Saya merasa mampu memilih bentuk kata kerja yang benar untuk berbagai tense				
13	Kosakata saya mendukung pemahaman dan penggunaan tense yang kompleks				
14	Saya bisa memilih kata kerja yang tepat untuk konteks yang berbeda				
15	Saya merasa memiliki kosakata yang cukup untuk menulis dan menyusun kalimat yang kompleks dengan tense yang benar.				
16	Saya mampu menghindari kesalahan dalam penggunaan kata kerja beraturan dan tidak beraturan dalam kalimat				
17	Kosakata saya mendukung pemahaman saya tentang berbagai bentuk kata kerja.				
18	Saya merasa percaya diri menggunakan kosakata baru yang saya pelajari				
19	Saya dapat menggunakan berbagai bentuk kata kerja tanpa kesulitan dalam berbagai tense				
20	Kosakata saya membantu saya merasa lebih percaya diri saat berbicara dan menulis				
Variable 3					
21	Saya melihat kesalahan sebagai kesempatan untuk belajar dan berkembang serta bagian alami dari proses belajar				
22	Saya merasa yakin dengan kemampuan saya untuk memperbaiki kesalahan				
23	Saya dapat mengatasi ketakutan saya terhadap kesalahan dengan mudah				
24	Saya merasa termotivasi untuk belajar dari kesalahan saya				
25	Saya merasa percaya diri meskipun membuat kesalahan dalam latihan				
26	Saya merasa tenang saat menghadapi tantangan dalam penggunaan tense				

27	Saya tidak membiarkan ketakutan menghalangi saya untuk berlatih tenses dan mencoba struktur tata bahasa yang baru				
28	Saya menganggap umpan balik tentang kesalahan saya sebagai hal yang berguna				
29	Saya merasa lebih percaya diri setelah memperbaiki kesalahan				
30	Saya merasa nyaman bereksperimen dengan berbagai bentuk kata kerja yang belum saya kuasai tanpa rasa takut				
Variable 4					
31	Saya menikmati proses belajar tense kata kerja dan merasa termotivasi untuk terus berlatih.				
32	Saya memiliki motivasi tinggi untuk mengatasi tantangan tata bahasa dan mempelajari bentuk kata kerja yang kompleks.				
33	Saya merasa termotivasi untuk meningkatkan keterampilan menulis saya melalui latihan tense, meskipun menghadapi kesulitan.				
34	Saya berusaha keras untuk memahami dan menggunakan tense dengan benar serta mengatasi kekurangan dalam pemahaman tata bahasa.				
35	Saya termotivasi untuk terus berlatih dan mengasah keterampilan bahasa saya				
36	Saya merasa tertantang dan termotivasi untuk belajar aturan tata bahasa yang baru				
37	Saya merasa antusias tentang meningkatkan pemahaman saya mengenai kosakata dan tense				
38	Saya merasa belajar tense baru memberikan kepuasan pribadi				
39	Saya merasa bersemangat untuk menghadapi tantangan dalam penggunaan tense kata kerja				
40	Saya merasa termotivasi untuk mempraktikkan kosakata baru dan bentuk kata kerja				
Variable 5					

41	Metode pengajaran dan instruksi di kelas sangat membantu pemahaman saya tentang tense kata kerja				
42	Penjelasan tentang bentuk kata kerja tidak beraturan sangat jelas dan mendalam.				
43	Saya merasa contoh dan aktivitas dari guru memudahkan saya memahami dan berlatih aturan tense				
44	Metode pengajaran membuat belajar tentang bentuk kata kerja menarik dan meningkatkan pemahaman struktur tata bahasa				
45	Saya merasa strategi pengajaran di kelas membantu saya memahami tata bahasa yang kompleks dan aturan yang rumit				
46	Penjelasan guru tentang kata kerja beraturan dan tidak beraturan membuat belajar tense lebih mudah dan menyenangkan				
47	Kualitas dan konstruktivitas umpan balik dari guru sangat mendukung pemahaman saya tentang tense				
48	Metode pengajaran mendukung penerapan aturan tense dalam tulisan dan meningkatkan kepercayaan diri saya				
49	Guru menggunakan metode yang efektif untuk menjelaskan konjugasi kata kerja				
50	Aktivitas pengajaran di kelas mendukung penguasaan tense dan pencapaian saya dalam belajar bahasa Inggris				
Variable 6					
51	Saya mendapatkan banyak kesempatan untuk berlatih tense kata kerja di kelas, yang meningkatkan pemahaman saya tentang bentuk kata kerja				
52	Latihan yang dilakukan membantu saya merasa lebih percaya diri dalam penggunaan tense				
53	Saya merasa siap menghadapi ujian berkat latihan yang cukup dan banyak				

54	Saya mendapatkan banyak waktu untuk mempraktikkan aturan tense, yang sangat membantu dalam mempraktikkan tense di kelas				
55	Aktivitas latihan yang bervariasi mendukung saya dalam menguasai konjugasi kata kerja dan memahami penggunaan tense dengan lebih baik				
56	Latihan di kelas membuat saya lebih nyaman menggunakan tense dalam tulisan dan membantu saya merasa lebih percaya diri saat menulis				
57	Latihan yang diberikan membantu saya mengingat konjugasi kata kerja dengan baik dan mendukung pemahaman saya tentang aturan tata bahasa.				
58	Saya merasa puas dengan jumlah latihan yang diberikan, yang mendukung pencapaian saya dalam penggunaan tense				
59	Latihan yang cukup membantu saya memahami bentuk kata kerja yang kompleks dan merasa lebih terampil dalam penggunaan tense.				
60	Saya mendapatkan cukup kesempatan untuk berlatih penggunaan kata kerja tidak beraturan, yang mendukung pemahaman saya tentang ablaut dan zero modification				
Variable 7					
61	Lingkungan kelas mendukung saya dalam mencoba penggunaan tense kata kerja dan membuat saya merasa lebih percaya diri				
62	Saya merasa nyaman berlatih penggunaan tense dan bertanya di lingkungan kelas				
63	Lingkungan belajar yang positif dan suasana kelas yang mendukung memotivasi saya untuk mempraktikkan tense				
64	Kelas memberikan suasana yang mendukung pembelajaran tata bahasa dan dukungan yang saya butuhkan untuk belajar secara efektif				
65	Saya merasa dukungan dari teman dan guru, serta lingkungan kelas yang mendukung, membantu saya mengembangkan keterampilan				

	tata bahasa.				
66	Lingkungan belajar yang baik meningkatkan pemahaman saya tentang penggunaan tense dan membantu saya memahami bentuk kata kerja yang kompleks				
67	Lingkungan kelas yang mendukung mempermudah saya dalam berlatih penggunaan tense dan membuat saya merasa lebih siap menghadapi tantangan tata bahasa				
68	Lingkungan belajar di kelas membuat saya lebih termotivasi untuk memahami aturan tense dan membantu saya mengatasi tantangan penggunaan tense.				
69	Kelas menyediakan lingkungan yang positif untuk belajar dan mempraktikkan tense, sehingga membuat belajar menjadi lebih menyenangkan.				
70	Lingkungan kelas yang mendukung membantu pengembangan keterampilan tata bahasa saya.				
Variable 8					
71	Diskusi dengan teman membantu saya merasa lebih percaya diri menggunakan tense				
72	Teman- teman saya sering berlatih tense bersama saya				
73	Teman-teman saya sering berdiskusi tentang aturan tata bahasa dan bertukar ide tentang tense kata kerja dengan saya				
74	Saya merasa termotivasi oleh dukungan teman-teman dalam belajar tense				
75	Teman- teman saya mendukung saya dalam memahami bentuk kata kerja yang kompleks				
76	Saya merasa teman- teman saya memberikan dukungan yang cukup dalam belajar tata bahasa				
77	Teman- teman saya sering membantu saya dalam memahami serta mempraktikkan penggunaan tense yang benar				
78	Teman- teman saya memberikan umpan balik				

	konstruktif yang membantu saya berlatih						.
79	Teman- teman saya sering membantu saya berlatih berbagai bentuk kata kerja						
80	Saya merasa dukungan teman- teman saya meningkatkan keterampilan tata bahasa saya						