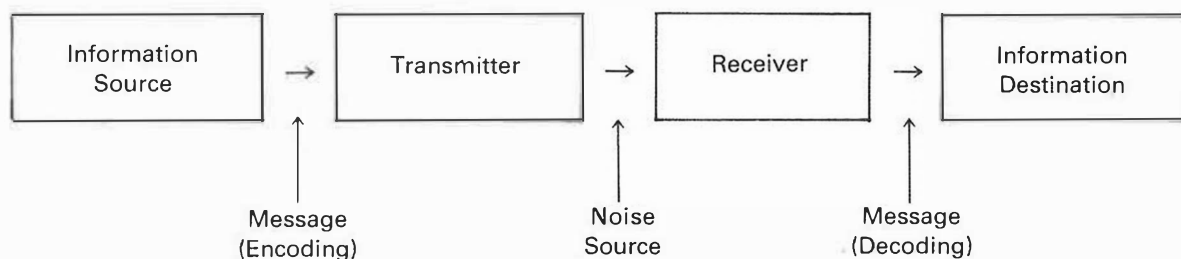


Some ten years ago, I was engaged in preparing a thesis for my Master's degree at a university in England. When I told my colleagues (we were eleven) that I had chosen as my topic 'Error Analysis', one of them snorted 'Error Analysis is dead'. Today, however, it appears to have been resurrected but sadly with the same body as before. At that time the analysis was usually presented in the form of a catalogue listing the features and their frequency as a percentage of the corpus of errors. Today it seems that the same technique is still being used, and one questions the usefulness to the teacher of such a presentation. Most teachers are able to recognise the errors in such a list, but more pertinently, I think, they would welcome an attempt at explaining the factors etc. which produced these errors. One hopes therefore that a brief re-statement of the princi-

ples involved in 'Error Analysis' as I saw them might help stimulate research into this area and help push back the frontiers of English Language teaching.

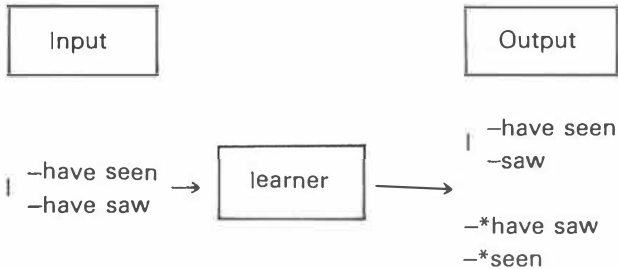
H.V. George used communication theory to provide a general theory of error in two areas interference and redundancy. He suggests that the errors in a learner's output are due to interference both from sources within the language and outside, as well as from the redundant features of the language. His explanation takes the view that the aim of the course designer is similar to that of straightforward communication, in that learner's output should be the English respectively, of the learner's and the course designer's input. He uses Warren Weaver's classical diagram of the communication process to illustrate this point.



The primary aim is that a message from source should reach its destination unchanged. The message consists of transmitted and received information. Putting information into message is encoding and extracting information from the message is decoding. For encoding and decoding to occur there must be a common code between the sender and receiver of the message. Sometimes the message is imperfectly received or it is different from the message sent. The reason lies in the noise or interference factor which can be within and outside the system. If the learner's output contains errors, it may be assumed that these have been caused by interference which may be of several types. If, for example, the selection and organi-

sation of the teaching material is not well planned and the items are presented so that they contrast with each other, then errors of cross-association and analogy are likely. Cross-association is the mutual interference between partially learned items each being affected by the other, especially if unreal contrasts are used to teach the language items. Indeed grammarians establish the contrast **stem x stem** +*-ed* as part of the grammar of language and our school courses follow suit with 'It is on the chair: it was on the chair ...' (George 1972: 139). This technique causes cross-association between the uses of *is* and *was* and the learners uses one for the other.

The following example will serve to illustrate this point. The present perfect tense 'is contrasted with the simple past tense ... 'Have you seen 'The Swordsman'? I saw it last night.' In terms of input and output the result is likely to be:



Where\* = incorrect forms.

Errors also occur because of false analogy. 'Analogy enables a learner to predict that certain already perceived relations will be paralleled by further relations. Often such predictions result in the production of unwanted forms as well as the wanted forms' (ibid: 143). Hence *shouted* and *watched* can lead to *\*hitted* and *\*maked*. These forms are a result of false analogy which in turn is a result of the pupil's past learning.

R.V White in 1975 notes that 'One ... widely observed characteristic is the reduction of several forms to one form by the learner. In other words variability is reduced to regularity and this is usually accompanied by simplification of the items concerned. One notable feature of these reduced varieties of the target language is the omission of redundant features in the code'. George suggests that there is fifty per cent redundancy in English in that half the items may be omitted without impairing communication. This '... shows that at least 50% of the information ... is redundant'. (ibid: 85). Items which are not in the learner's mother-tongue (copulas, inflections, etc.) tend to be seen as redundant because the learner is unable to attach any meaning to these forms as he can to lexical items which have a dictionary meaning. If the learner's mother-tongue does not have tense inflections, for example, his previous learning experience may promote or

hinder the learning features of English as they seem compatible or incompatible with those of his previous experience. This point may be illustrated in the following examples from Malay.

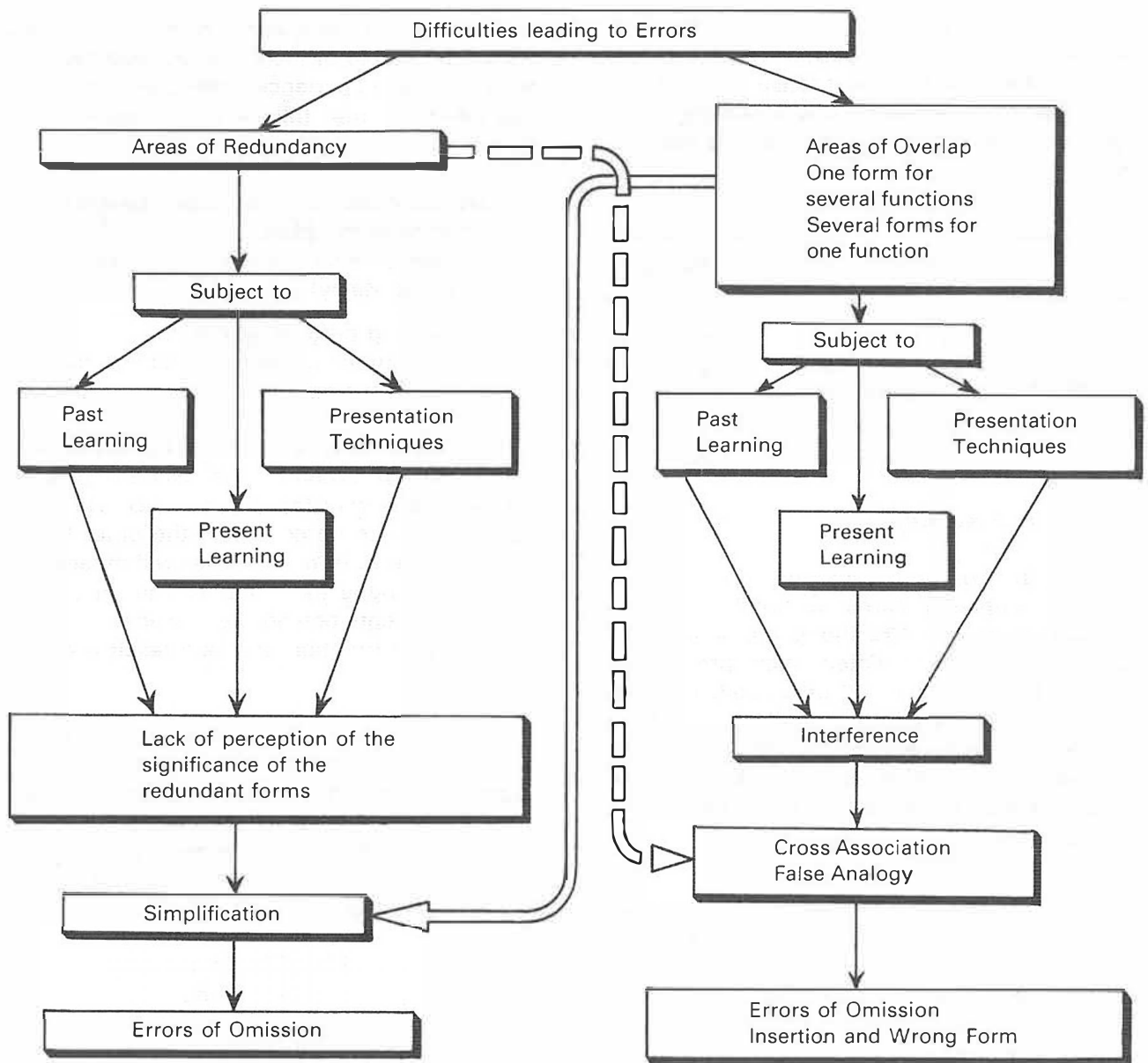
- (i) Semalam dia pergi ke pekan. (Literal translation from the Malay)  
Yesterday he go to town. (Literal translation from the Malay)
- (ii) Dia sedang pergi ke pekan.  
He continuous go to town. (Literal translation from the Malay)

The only difference has been the addition of a tense marker. When this process is applied to English, the learner tends to produce 'He *go* to market' because he considers the other forms of the verb *went* or *goes*, etc. as redundant due to mother-tongue interference. The inflections and the concepts behind them seem to convey redundant information and as a result they are omitted.

This tendency is also seen in what Richards calls overgeneralisation where the learner produces a deviant form based on his previous experience of other structures in the language. 'Overgeneralisation is associated with redundancy reduction. It may occur ... with items which are contrasted ... but which do not carry significant and obvious contrast for the learner.' (Richards 1974: 175). Thus the *-ed* marker in narrative appears to have little meaning for the Malay learner as the notion of pastness in Malay is usually indicated lexically in stories.

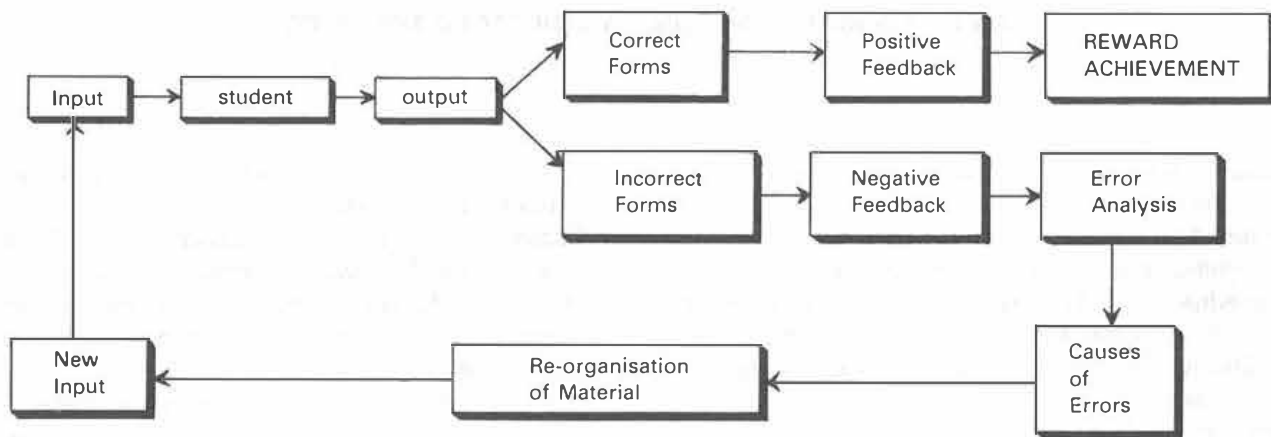
All of this means that the teacher has to employ strategies to give these forms their meaning so as to enable the pupils to understand their importance. 'Such errors demonstrate the wisdom of focussing the learner's attention on the key grammatical features when presenting and practising such items. Failure to organize the language input in this way will produce stem-form English.' (White 1975).

However, redundancy and interference are related and are not mutually exclusive. The way redundancy and interference act and interact may be shown by the diagram below.



A consideration of ways in which errors may be produced is helpful in formulating teaching programmes. Such an analysis provides a significant feedback in that it can establish what is wrong with the input if it is causing errors

and at the same time allows teachers to evaluate the efficiency of the material being used. The situation may be shown by the diagram below.



As a summary of the points dealt with, it may well be useful to consider the following questions and their affect on the teaching of language items.

1. Does this represent the ordinary use of the English language?
2. Does presentation of this item now, meet a language need which learners will appreciate, or is it introduced only for grammatical reasons?
3. When two or more items are listed together as one teaching point, will presenting them together make language learning easier or harder?
4. Will presentation of this item hinder later learning?
5. Will teaching this item undermine learning of previous items?
6. Will the learner's previous language experience help, hinder or have no effect?