

'Scientific' Language Teaching

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A recent blog-post by Scott Thornbury on substitution tables (Thornbury 2017) which touches on contributions by Harold E. Palmer (1877–1949) to their theorisation and development, reminded me that there is still just about time this year to celebrate the centenary of Palmer's 'classic' (1917) work, *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*. This book can be seen to have heralded what Tony Howatt and I have termed a 'Scientific Period' of language teaching discourse, a period of at least 50 years during which language teaching theorists tended to relate their proposals quite strongly to background scientific research of various kinds (Howatt and Smith 2014)

In 1923, Palmer himself set up an Institute for Research in English Teaching in Tokyo (IRET) in Tokyo which was a world-leader in the pre-war period (see Smith 2013). In fact it was really the *only* place where organised research into English as L2 teaching was going on until the University of Michigan English Language Institute was founded in the 1940s. *The Scientific Study* predated the generally acknowledged debut of 'applied linguistics' by 30 years, and the Tokyo research work itself prefigured and influenced that in the

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY & TEACHING OF LANGUAGES

A REVIEW OF THE FACTORS AND PROBLEMS
CONNECTED WITH THE LEARNING AND
TEACHING OF MODERN LANGUAGES WITH
AN ANALYSIS OF THE VARIOUS METHODS
WHICH MAY BE ADOPTED IN ORDER TO
ATTAIN SATISFACTORY RESULTS

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USA and UK in the post-war era, though in generally unacknowledged forms. I've written elsewhere (Smith 2011) about the way Palmer's conception of (something like) applied linguistics as reflected in the work he and, from 1936 onwards, A.S. Hornby (1898–1978) were engaged in at IRET was a broader, more eclectic and practice-centred conception both than post-war 'linguistics applied' and the kind of new academic discipline Palmer seemed to be proposing in *The Scientific Study*.

I say 'seemed' because a close, contextual reading of the latter book (see Smith 2011) shows that the actual conclusions Palmer proposed are not derived from background sciences (linguistics, psychology etc.) so much as from his own experimentation as

a practitioner-researcher in Belgium, where he taught from 1902 to 1914). This is actually quite clear from his Dedicatory Preface to the book (Palmer 1917: 5-8).

Palmer mainly based his recommendations and conclusions in *The Scientific Study* on a series of experiments carried out into his own practice as a language teacher in Belgium – they were founded on a form of ‘practitioner research’, in other words. As his daughter later wrote, he “explored the possibilities of one method after another, both as teacher and student. He would devise, adopt, modify or reject one plan after another as the result of further research and experience in connexion with many languages – living and artificial.” (Anderson 1969: 136-7)



What was really new was the way, in his 1917 and later works, Palmer set out to provide a principled basis for all kinds of approach, to be selected according to needs and context, in accordance with the following realisation (expressed in the book’s Dedicatory Preface):

“cen’est pas la méthode qui nous manque; ce qui nous manque’est la base même de la méthode” (“it is not ‘method’ that we lack; what we lack is a *basis* for method” (my translation)) (Palmer 1917: 5-6).

And this was Palmer’s major contribution – to argue that a basis is needed for methods which goes beyond salesmanship, beyond fashion; and that there is no one method suited for all occasions but instead many possibilities, necessitating careful selection.

This is true of his ‘Substitution Method’ (which resembled, but of course predated by a long way audiolingualism) as much as it is of his ‘ostensive line of approach’ (which prefigured TPR) or the reader-centred approach he developed for Japanese schools. These all came out of theorised experience as a teacher or teacher educator, but none of them was elevated to the status of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ method.

When – or whether – the ‘scientific period’ heralded by Palmer’s contribution ended is open to question. On the one hand, some well-known ELT gurus have recently been seeming to claim that research has little to offer language teachers (e.g. Maley 2016; Medgyes 2017). On the other hand, they seem to be arguing against something they

see as still prevalent in the field – a tendency to venerate researchers (‘science’) at the expense of insights from experience and ‘craft knowledge’.

What we can say is that ‘science’ is not accorded the automatic respect it once had – in the heyday of audiolingualism, for example, when behaviourist psychology and structural linguistics seemed to provide a solid, largely unquestioned underpinning to drills which treated learners rather like laboratory rats!



It seems to me that the ELT profession needs a new, rebalanced view of the relationship between ELT and research or ‘science’, one which acknowledges the need to base research on teachers’ priorities, the desirability of teachers themselves being researchers of their own practice and the importance, also, of teachers being critical of ‘academic’ research. At the same time, we need to stop stereotyping research and see that there are many kinds, some with definite relevance for the classroom, some with none – and that we can usually only talk about possible *implications* of research, not direct applications.

A revised conception like this – which is consistent with Henry Widdowson’s ongoing critique of the top-down nature of certain

forms of applied linguistics (including in his recent plenary for the British Association for Applied Linguistics: Widdowson2017) – would, in fact, constitute a return to Palmer’s own lived conception of problem-oriented, practical research, though not to what he claimed – somewhat precociously and even, in some ways, pretentiously – to be setting up as an academic discipline in his 1917 work, *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*.

Note

This article was first published in the form of a blog-post on 19 November 2017. For more information on Harold E. Palmer’s life and work, the reader is invited to consult the relevant Warwick ELT Archive Hall of Fame web-page here: warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive/halloffame/palmer and/or the book *The Writings of Harold E. Palmer: an Overview*, freely downloadable from the same website.

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