Harold E. Palmer's alternative 'applied linguistics'

Richard Smith

University of Warwick

Abstract

The development of Harold E. Palmer's pioneering conception of a 'science of language-teaching' is described with reference to primary sources and previously neglected writings. The issue of whether Palmer was a precursor of 'linguistics applied' is addressed, with the conclusion being reached that his writings and activities reveal important *differences* from both previous and subsequent applied linguistic conceptions. On this 'historiographical' basis the article highlights the value of an approach to the history of applied linguistics which avoids over-literal attachment to the 'applied linguistics' label.

Key words

Introduction

The status of Harold E. Palmer (1877—1949) not only as an applied linguist *avant la lettre* but as a principal *founder* of applied linguistics as discipline, at least in the British context, has been previously asserted with some authority, specifically by Stern (1983) and Howatt (1994). Thus, Stern (1983, p. 100) reports that 'Palmer is often considered "the father of British applied linguistics"'. Howatt (1994, p. 291) concurs with this assessment, viewing Palmer as 'the founder, with Daniel Jones [. . .], of what eventually became the British school of applied linguistics'. In the U.S. context, also, in response to the republication of Palmer's *The Principles of Language-Study* in the mid-1960s (Palmer 1921/1964), both Barrutia (1965) and Roddis (1968) highlighted the similarity of many of the ideas in this book with those then current in applied linguistics. A little later, Darian (1969; 1972) made the same comparison, referring additionally to *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*, which had by then also been republished (Palmer 1917/1968). As Titone (1968, p. 70) asserted, writing — it

would appear — primarily for an American audience, '[Palmer's] closeness to the sophisticated views of contemporary applied linguistics is striking'.

On the other hand, no recognition has so far been given to ways in which Palmer's conception of the relationship of theory and research with language teaching — that is, what he called variously the 'science of linguistic pedagogy', the 'science of language-teaching' or the 'science of language-study' — may have been *different* from the post-World War II notion of 'applied linguistics'. Indeed, despite the importance ascribed to Palmer by Stern and Howatt, there has been a dearth of comprehensive, in-depth investigation of his overall 'applied linguistic' conception, viewed on its own terms and within its own historical setting. Partly, this is attributable to a general absence of involvement in or apparent interest in historical research among applied linguists, an absence which this themed issue begins to redress (see also Linn (2008) and Smith (2009) for previous attempts to set the history of applied linguistics on a firmer foundation). As I shall further explain below, in the absence within applied linguistics of the types of 'historiographical' attitude and research approach which were argued for more than thirty years ago by Koerner (1978) in relation to linguistics 'proper', there has been a tendency for Palmer's pioneering attempts to establish a science of linguistic pedagogy either to be ignored or to be anachronistically and somewhat superficially co-opted to post-war applied linguistic conceptions.

Previous references to Palmer as applied linguist have tended to be justified on the basis of summaries of the two major works already mentioned above, both of which were originally published during the brief (1915—22) spell when he held academic positions at the University of London (University College and the School of Oriental Studies). *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (*SSTL*) and *The Principles of Language-Study* (*PLS*) have aspects in common, but, as I shall show, they also reveal different emphases which have not previously been highlighted. In 1922 Palmer left London to begin a thirteen-year period as 'Adviser on Teaching Methods' to the Japanese Department (i.e. Ministry) of Education. By far the majority of his writings were published in Japan, and until recently have been largely unavailable and unread outside that country (selected works have now been reissued, in Institute for Research in Language Teaching (1995/1999) and Smith (2003)). Thus, the development of Palmer's thinking in Japan on the links between theory, research and language teaching practice has not previously been explored (though see Smith (1998) on the practical work he carried out). From both these points of view, then — that is, with regard to the development between *SSTL* and *PLS*, and between both of these and his work in Japan — the full picture of Palmer's conception of 'applied linguistic' activity remains to be revealed.

This article therefore aims to provide new information about, contextualize and explore developments in Palmer's conception of the 'science of linguistic pedagogy', thereby presenting a much fuller picture than has previously been available, on the basis of original historical research.

The scope of the article is deliberately restricted in the following ways: I confine my analysis to Palmer's statements on links between theory, research and practice, and to practical work underlying or illustrating these statements, and I end my account around 1925, even though he made significant practical applied linguistic contributions after this date. Although I shall compare Palmer's conceptions with the views of later applied linguists, I refrain from speculation regarding their actual influence, focusing instead on describing and explaining the evolving nature of Palmer's science of linguistic pedagogy in its own context, and on its own terms.

The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages (1917)

In 1914 Palmer was forced to leave Belgium, where he had established his own language school, in flight from the German invasion. He subsequently moved to London, where he gained employment as a secondary school French teacher. Daniel Jones, who had previously met and corresponded with Palmer, additionally invited him to give three public lectures at University College London (UCL) in the autumn term of 1915, on 'Methods of Language Teaching'.[1] Following two further short courses of lectures in 1915—16, Palmer was then invited to prepare and deliver a full year of lectures on the same theme for 1916—17, as part of the schedule of classes offered within the Department of Phonetics.[2] It seems to have been in response to this stimulus (and perhaps, indeed, to consolidate his new-found academic status) that Palmer wrote *SSTL*, writing it so rapidly, indeed, that it was completed by January 1917 (the date of its 'Dedicatory Preface').

Like Henry Sweet's (1899) *The Practical Study of Languages* before it, *SSTL* is significant for its focus on general principles, but it extends Sweet's call for a rational basis for language teaching by means of an overall argument in favour of the establishment of a new 'science of linguistic pedagogy' (Palmer 1917, p. 6) on the basis of insights from philologists, phoneticians, grammarians, lexicologists, modern pedagogy and psychologists, with these insights 'placed in such order and with such observance of proportion that the inevitable conclusions will suggest themselves' (p. 22). Two initial points relating to the originality of Palmer's thinking are worth making here: Firstly, Palmer's conception of the linguistic foundations of language teaching and learning appears broader than Sweet's, whose

(1899) focus is firmly on phonetics as the 'indispensable foundation' of language study, with considerations relating to phonetics and pronunciation taking up five of the first six chapters of Sweet's book. Secondly, the sources of insight indicated as relevant in *SSTL* are not confined even to this wider conception of language-study (involving insights from philologists, phoneticians, grammarians and lexicologists). Palmer's willingness to admit insights from 'modern pedagogy' and 'psychologists' makes his conception broader than that of Sweet with his attachment to phonetics, *and* broader than that of the American linguists who were concerned above all to apply the insights of structural linguistics to language teaching during World War II and the immediate post-war era. Indeed, Palmer's conception could be seen as relatively close to the multidisciplinary, autonomous, and problem-focused rather than linguistics-driven view of applied linguistics which evolved in the fourth quarter of the 20th century, largely under the joint inspiration of Brumfit (e.g. 1980) and Widdowson (e.g. 1979; 1980).

SSTL begins with a discussion of the nature of language (in chapter 2), and does not in fact delve much into psychology or learning theory; however, the factors (chapter 3) and principles (chapter 4) of linguistic pedagogy which form the basis for the second half of the book — itself consisting of a series of quite practical suggestions concerning course design, teacher competences and student characteristics — appear to be only informed, not *governed* by linguistic considerations, with theorized and systematized practical experience also figuring quite strongly as a major source of insight. With the later publication of *PLS* (1921), Palmer was to show more comprehensively how insights from the psychology of language learning could inform language teaching theory, while — as we shall see — the (1924) *Memorandum* was to marry to this observations from the field of 'speech-psychology' (an early form of psycholinguistics).

With the aim in mind of compensating for an existing 'lack of co-ordinated system' in the field of language teaching (p. 25), adopting a 'scientific' approach in Palmer's (1917) conception seems to have been largely a question of ordering, or organizing many existing sources of insight into a coherent whole: 'To lay the foundations of the science of language-study it will not be necessary to make new discoveries; it will be quite sufficient to collect factors which are perfectly well known and to co-ordinate them into one comprehensive system' (p. 22). The new science must be founded, then,

in accordance with the scientific method, which is:
(a) To collect isolated facts and factors in such numbers as to cover the whole field of inquiry.

(b) To classify, examine, and correlate them.

(c) To draw from them certain conclusions upon which the fundamental principles may be established and stated in categoric terms.

(d) To confirm and justify these principles by putting them to the test of actual and continual practice.

(Palmer 1917, p. 20)

SSTL shows how (a) to (c) above might be effected in practice by considering, in turn, the 'nature of language' and preliminary factors and principles of 'linguistic pedagogy', and then proceeding to show how these insights can be utilized in the design not only of 'an ideal standard programme' but also special programmes for specific types of learner with different learning purposes. A form of principled pluralism was thus an important aspect of Palmer's approach, although not expounded explicitly as an important principle at this stage.

As I shall further emphasize below, practical 'experimentation' was an additional, important aspect of Palmer's overall conception of scientific work which has been largely neglected in previous studies. In this connection, tenet (d) above is worthy of note, although this was not to be as fully implemented in practice during Palmer's London years as it had been during his time as a language teacher in Verviers and as it was to be again with teachers in Japan from around 1924 onwards (see below). In *SSTL* Palmer does, however, hint that organization is needed not only conceptually but also materially: 'the "ploughing of lonely furrows" should be replaced by co-ordinated efforts to discover the best means and to adapt these means to the right end' (1917, p. 26—27). The need for conceptual and material co-operation and co-ordination is repeated in Palmer's concluding exhortation: 'if you hold with us that the future of language-teaching and study should be based on organized and unified thought, then collaborate in the work which so far has barely commenced' (Palmer 1917, p. 281). Institutionalization, Palmer seems to suggest, needs to go hand in hand with his theoretical pleas for a science of language-teaching to be established. As things turned out, however, it was not until he went to Japan and founded the Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET) in Tokyo in 1923 that this collaborative ideal was to be realized.

Another later development that deserves highlighting at this stage was that in Japan Palmer clearly revised his previously stated view regarding the lack of a need to make new discoveries (Palmer 1917, p. 22, cited above), viewing his work there instead very definitely as *contributing* new insights, not just synthesizing existing sources of insight (Palmer 1929). By contrast, *SSTL* was mainly intended to 'set forth the data which the writer ha[d] collected over a period of sixteen years' work' (p. 16), in other words to synthesize and consolidate

insights already developed from Palmer's own previous practical investigations rather than — as yet — to indicate new kinds of research that would need to be undertaken.

The Principles of Language-Study (1921)

PLS (1921) extended the attempt begun in *SSTL* to present a systematic overview of ideas relevant to language teaching, complementing *SSTL*'s largely language-oriented and 'practice theorized' kind of approach with additional insights relating to the psychology of language learning. Overall, *PLS* can be seen as a more 'thought-through, distilled and authoritative' (Howatt with Widdowson 2004, p. 270) overview of principles of linguistic pedagogy than *SSTL*.

Apart from this assessment, differences between the two works have not been remarked upon by previous researchers — but there are some very notable shifts of emphasis between *SSTL* and *PLS* with regard to statements about the kind of theory which should inform practice, and the proposed relationship between them.

Firstly, the role of language *learning* theory is now (in *PLS*) viewed as fundamental to the selection of methods. Whereas discussion of the 'nature of language' had been in primary position in *SSTL*, this receives surprisingly little attention in *PLS*. The first third (Chapters 1—5) of *PLS* instead constitutes an innovative discussion of the nature of language *learning*, with language teaching hardly being mentioned. (It is notable in this connection that the title of the book refers to '*Language-Study*', but not at all to teaching — indeed, over the period 1916—1921 there was a clear shift in emphasis in Palmer's article and book titles: from 'Some principles of language <u>teaching</u>' (1916) to *The Scientific <u>Study and Teaching</u> of Languages* (1917), to *The Principles of Language-<u>Study</u>* (1921) (emphases added).)

Absent also are the practical examples of course design and pedagogy which had characterized *SSTL*. Overall, it seems possible to read the first five chapters of *PLS* quite literally as a (target language-neutral) treatise on how readers might themselves consider learning (and not simply preparing to teach) a foreign language.

This previously neglected but nevertheless very striking change in emphasis between *SSLT* and *PLS* can largely be explained with reference to a shift in Palmer's own professional focus between their respective dates of composition. At the time of writing *SSLT,* Palmer was himself a French teacher, and seems to have been hoping to encourage other teachers of modern languages towards reform in British secondary schools (thus, the examples given in the book are mainly related to the teaching of French). However, this avenue of influence did not turn out to be open to him. Increasingly, by force of demand, his lectures shifted in focus

towards the needs of missionaries and others who were preparing for overseas service and who needed to learn so-called 'remote' (that is, largely, Asian and African) languages. Thus, changes in the titles and stated contents of Palmer's lecture courses at UCL in the period 1917—21 reveal a shift in focus away from teaching and towards language *learning* or 'study', to the extent that one of his two courses of lectures at UCL in 1921—22 was advertised explicitly as 'A Course of 10 Lectures on How to Study a Foreign Language without a Teacher'.[3] Indeed, starting in the 1918—19 academic session, 'Theory of Language Study' replaced 'Methods of Language Teaching' as the umbrella title for Palmer's lecture courses at UCL.[4]

From 1918 onwards, Palmer also appears to have carved out a niche for himself both at UCL and at the recently established School of Oriental Studies (SOS) in teaching a form of general 'linguistics'. Indeed, it is not outlandish to suggest that in the UK context Palmer was the first academic to recognize the importance of Ferdinand de Saussure's work (see Palmer 1921a, p. 78), the first also to recognize the need for a new discipline which would further the synchronic analysis of language in its grammatical, not just its phonological and phonetic aspects (for example, via the focus on 'ergonics' in *SSLT*),[5] and indeed the first to actually deliver a university course explicitly on the topic of 'Linguistics'. Thus, the academic year 1918—19 saw the organization at SOS of a 'special course of Lectures in Linguistics, with a view to the particular needs of missionaries studying Oriental Languages at the School'.[6] By 1920—21 Linguistics had become the third best-attended SOS course after Phonetics and Arabic.[7] Thus, although J.R. Firth (1890—1960) was the first to establish the subject fully in the UK, as Professor of General Linguistics at SOAS from 1944 until 1956 (Love 1988), Palmer was, it seems, a quarter of a century ahead of his time in founding linguistics at SOS as well as teaching it during the period 1918—22.

Already by 1918, then, Palmer had transformed his original course on 'methods of language teaching' into sessions on 'methods of language-study' or 'Linguistics', for a new student body of missionaries and others learning 'remote' languages rather than school teachers. It should be emphasized indeed that 'Linguistics', in Palmer's course descriptions, was always allied to practical language learning needs, being more akin in this respect to Sweet's (1899) 'practical study of languages' than to what we now conceive of as 'general linguistics'. This is exemplified in the following brief advertisement for his 1920—21 SOS lectures:

Lectures on "Linguistics" as applied to the learning of Oriental Languages are given by Mr. Palmer at the School of Oriental Studies on Mondays at 4 o'clock.[8]

It can safely be assumed that the clear shift in emphasis towards language *learning* between *SSTL* and *PLS* was related to the shift in target audience and focus for Palmer's lectures which I have outlined above, while — given the relative lack of emphasis on *language* in *PLS* — one might speculate that at least some of the contents of his lectures on 'Linguistics' found a home not in *PLS* but in his 'Saussurean' *Memorandum on Problems of English Teaching in the Light of a New Theory* (Palmer 1924), to be considered further below.

Palmer did also give one term-long course of lectures on 'How to teach English to Foreigners' (in 1917—18), the first such course at a British university and a precursor thereby of the many MA in ELT, TEFL or TESOL programmes which currently attract so many students to Britain. His work in London specifically on the teaching of English as a foreign language was largely confined after then to self-developmental efforts in connection with his own teaching of Spoken English at UCL, and associated materials writing. This second, TEFL-focused strand of Palmer's work at the time was not in evidence in *PLS* but was given quite full expression in *The Teaching of Oral English* (1921b). The latter book presents a wide range of teaching techniques and procedures which are consistent with the learning theories expounded in *PLS,* although the link is not made explicit in either work. It was only with Palmer's hitherto neglected (1924) *Memorandum* that the two strands were to be joined together, with principles of language learning and language teaching practices consistent with them being related for the first time in a systematic fashion.

Aside from the change in focus from language to language *learning*, a further shift in emphasis between *SSTL* and *PLS* is towards a more explicit recognition of the attractions of principled eclecticism, or, as Palmer terms it, 'multiple lines of approach'. Discussion of this will be incorporated below, since it was to become an even more central, indeed a governing principle in Palmer's conception of 'applied linguistic' activity following his arrival in Japan in 1922.

Memorandum on Problems of English Teaching in the Light of a New Theory (1924)

In February 1922 Palmer left London to begin a three-year contract (later extended) as *Eigokyoju komon* ('Adviser on English Teaching Methods') to the Japanese Department of Education. Palmer's brief was to engage in research to develop reformed methods for the

teaching of English in Japanese middle (i.e. secondary) schools. The official most responsible for 'head-hunting' Palmer, Sawayanagi Masataro, claimed to have advised him that he 'might spend the whole period of three years in his research' (Sawayanagi 1924, p. 5). The prospect of engaging in research with definite reformist potential may indeed have been an important factor in persuading Palmer to take up the invitation extended to him.

After twenty months' initial investigation, Palmer felt ready to present his blueprint for reform, entitled *Memorandum on Problems of English Teaching in the Light of a New Theory* (1924) (henceforth, 'the *Memorandum*'). This is a reformulation of Palmer's conception of the relationship between theory and practice which, along with the bulk of the work Palmer published in Japan during the thirteen years he stayed there, has received next to no attention from scholars in the west. Nevertheless, the *Memorandum* constitutes an important development of Palmer's previous, more widely appreciated thinking on the nature of the relationship between theory and practice as expressed in *SSTL* and *PLS*. Thus, the eclectic 'multiple line of approach' conception which is outlined in *PLS* (pp. 161—9) is explained more concretely and has a central place in the *Memorandum*, being more firmly connected with a general theory of language, and specific theories of second language use and acquisition. In the *Memorandum* Palmer presents and expounds a synoptic 'model' which proposes a more coherent whole than the series of axioms in *PLS*.

Palmer begins the *Memorandum* with his own interpretation of Saussure's differentiation between *langue* and *parole*, translated as 'Language' and 'Speech', respectively, although Palmer was later to prefer the term 'Code' for *langue*. Emphasizing that language teaching has traditionally been focused on 'Language' (*langue*), in the sense of focusing on the transmission of information *about* language, Palmer states that the 'Speech' side — that is, directly engaging students in understanding and otherwise *using* the target language — has been neglected, and that this would therefore be the focus of his reform efforts. In 1923 Palmer had invited Albert Sechehaye, one of the editors of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, to be an honorary member of his newly founded Institute for Research in English Teaching (Naganuma 1934, p. 213), and he confirmed his practical understanding of the *langue—parole* distinction via correspondence with Sechehaye, some of which was published in the Institute's *Bulletin*. In a later, fulsome tribute to Palmer, Sechehaye (1934) confirmed the basic validity of Palmer's use of the distinction, noting 'vous l'avez saisie par l'angle qui vous intéressait' (p. 11), and referring to the 'précieuse collaboration de la science pure et de la pratique qui est notre idéal commun' (p. 14). In later years Palmer was to state repeatedly that Saussure's distinction had been a crucial one for him

from the perspective of clarifying the nature of language as a basis for language teaching reform.[9]

Palmer next weds to the 'Speech' side of the problem a distinction based, he claims, on contemporary speech psychology, between 'Primary' and 'Secondary' Speech Circuits. The debt to Saussure is clear where the 'primary speech circuit' is concerned, but Palmer built on this to propose the existence also of a 'secondary speech circuit' (which concerns reading and writing). The source of this insight is not clear but, whatever its provenance, science is enlisted once again in support of Palmer's reform priorities in seeming to support the idea of a major focus on oral language mastery — the 'primary speech circuit', being primary, needs to be mastered before the 'secondary speech circuit' can be engaged, in other words, listening and speaking first, reading and writing only later.

As summarized so far, the model presented in the *Memorandum* is a top-down, apparently universalist one, leaving no room for variation according to context. As with *SSLT*, the overall approach seems at first sight to be akin to 'linguistics applied', in other words the kind of unmediated theory-first application of linguistic insights to real-world problems which began to be strongly critiqued by, among others, Henry Widdowson from the late 1970s onwards.[10] However, as with *SSLT* again, a more practical and flexible reality lies beneath the surface. There follows a list of 'speech-habits' which seems to owe more to Palmer's own previous observations on 'The student' (chapter 8 of *SSTL*) than to contemporary speech-psychology. Next come practical principles of course-design, largely repeated from *PLS*, and after these there is a strong 'buffering' indication that only the experimental adoption of multiple lines of approach can achieve the aims established, with examples being provided of the possible lines of approach to be envisaged.

Thus, the *Memorandum* provided Palmer with clear justifications and directions for practical research and development, presenting a scientifically based model which emphasized the need to develop a number of 'Speech habits' for enhancement of the ability to 'think in English' (whether in the spoken or the written medium) but which at the same time, and within these limits, allowed for an eclectic range of possible teaching procedures ('Forms of Work'), potentially encompassing 'grammar and structure' work (for production), reading and writing, as well as listening and speaking.

Palmer's confidence in the belief that 'science' should inform practice is clear, then, not only in the top-down conception (the left-hand side) of the *Memorandum*'s model of 'applied linguistic' activity but also — importantly — in the valuing of contextual

experimentation by Japanese teachers which was inherent in its 'multiple lines of approach' right-hand side. This will be explained further in the next section.

The 'Standard English Course' (1924—25)

Aside from the *Memorandum* itself, another area in which Palmer's contribution is largely unknown in the west but which merits greater recognition is the way he actually put his conception of appropriate links between theory and practice to the test in Japan, with a focus on research and practical experimentation in context, and the way this conception can be said to have shown its practical worth. As a would-be reformer in Japan, Palmer saw his role primarily as that of a 'course-designer', providing materials which would be consistent with the 'scientific' foundations he had outlined in the *Memorandum*, but allowing for 'experiment' by teachers in context which would prove or disprove these materials' validity. As is stated in the *Memorandum*,

> A *Scientifically Designed Course* is one in which the most appropriate Speech Material is selected, presented through the medium of the appropriate Forms of Work, these Forms of Work being selected, proportioned and graded in a manner most likely to bring about the most economical and the most effective results
>
> (Palmer 1924, p. 53)

To a degree, of course, this is a top-down conception: the course-designer provides materials in accordance with the findings of the grammarian, the philologist, the phonetician and the speech-psychologist (p. 62), and it is then for the teacher to use these in practice. However, the full value and significance of the *Memorandum* in its own time and context becomes much more apparent when considered alongside the phenomenon of actual practical encouragement of experimentation by teachers which I shall now describe.

To help in his reformist efforts, Palmer founded the Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET) in Tokyo in 1923. Sawayanagi's advice that he might spend his entire time in research informed the establishment of this Institute, but membership was open to all English teachers in Japan. Hence, the research Palmer envisaged was clearly not 'background' or 'pure' research but, rather, reform-oriented experimentation involving teachers themselves, with particular practical goals in mind. As a research institute devoted to the investigation of problems relating to language teaching, IRET was unique at this time in the world, fulfilling the collaborative ideal expressed in *SSTL* of stimulating 'co-ordinated efforts to discover the best means [of teaching] and to adapt these means to the right end' (Palmer 1917, p. 26—27).

IRET was established in the first instance to meet the 'immediate need' of 'compilation, printing and distribution of various types of English Language Courses', in order to encourage existing reform efforts and to provide an impetus to 'research and experimental work' on the basis of their use.[11] Following his completion of the *Memorandum*, Palmer embarked on an ambitious programme of materials-writing, explicitly proclaimed as 'experimental', which resulted in a variety of 1924 and (especially) 1925 IRET publications (see Smith 1999 for an overview). These materials were designed to reflect in concrete form a number of the 'multiple lines of approach' indicated as available in the *Memorandum*. Together they were envisaged as forming a 'Standard Course of English', but one which would be put together by teachers themselves, according to local needs and with the support of whichever IRET resources seemed most appropriate on the ground (Palmer and Palmer 1925, p. 5, 8). The 'Standard Course' conception was therefore consistent not only with the *Memorandum*'s emphasis on 'multiple lines of approach' but also with IRET's originally formulated aim of encouraging existing reform efforts by individual teachers, and providing an impetus to situated teacher-research which would then feed back into revised overall strategies for reform. Thus, aside from putting into practice the 'multiple lines of approach' conception introduced in *PLS* and raised to a central position in the *Memorandum*, the 'Standard Course' can be said to have implemented tenet (d) from *SSTL* (as quoted above), namely: 'To confirm and justify [fundamental] principles by putting them to the test of actual and continual practice' (Palmer 1917, p. 20). As I have previously shown (Smith 1998), feedback from Japanese teachers in relation to the 'Standard English Course' materials did indeed influence a subsequent, quite significant modification in Palmer's and the Institute's overall reform approach, bringing about a greater concentration on the teaching of reading and writing skills and the use of (improved, better-graded) core textbooks in combination with associated oral and writing work.

A reassessment of Palmer as 'applied linguist' *avant la lettre*

When read out of context and from the perspective of post-World War II developments, Palmer's best-known London publications — in particular *SSTL* — can give the impression of proposing a relatively top-down, theory-driven conception of 'linguistics applied' type activity. After all, as van Essen (2000, p. 271) has noted, the publication of *SSTL* represented the first time for the word 'scientific' to be explicitly associated with language education, and he also notes that 'This book contained so many idiosyncratic terms (e.g. ergonics) that it must have driven many a contemporary reader to despair' (ibid.). This kind of impression

may have led Véronique (1992, p. 187) to refer to Palmer as 'un linguiste appliquant au sens […] d'un chercheur en linguistique qui puise son inspiration, qui alimente sa théorie des travaux qu'il mène dans le domaine de l'enseignement des langues',[12] contrasting Palmer's with Sweet's (1899) approach, which is itself viewed as a welcome alternative to the scientism of applied linguistics (ibid.). As I hope I have already demonstrated, and as I shall reemphasize below, the view that Palmer was primarily a linguistic researcher and only secondarily concerned with language teaching is without question a mistaken one. Indeed, I wish to argue here that — despite possible appearances to the contrary — Palmer's overall approach itself represented (and continues to represent) a striking alternative to post-war 'linguistics applied' types of conception.

To understand this better we need to contextualize Palmer's work still further, by examining his earliest years as a language teacher and teacher-researcher. This is because the roots of Palmer's 'science of linguistic pedagogy' can be seen to lie mainly in his practical work as a language teacher in Belgium (1902—1914), although his reading of Reform Movement theorists including Sweet and Paul Passy latterly also had a role to play. Thus, following the establishment of his own language institute in Verviers (the *Institut Palmer*), he is reported to have been 'free to use, and develop, whatever system of teaching he pleased' (Bongers 1947, p. 74):

> [H]e 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 results [*sic*] of further research and experience with all types of pupils and in connection with many languages.
> (ibid.)

In modern terms, Palmer's attitude at this formative time in his career can be described as that of an 'action researcher': he attempted to develop solutions to issues which arose in his own practice by investigating these problems in a systematic fashion, developing new interventions on this basis, and then evaluating their success or otherwise via practical experiment.

A significant turning point seems to have been reached around 1908—9. In the preface to *SSTL* (1917, p. 6), which Palmer dedicated to his friend Edouard Mathieu, he wrote:

> You will remember our search for the one true standard and universal method, the goal that ever seemed so near, and yet which ever proved just beyond our grasp. You will also remember the day

when we formulated our conclusion: *Ce n'est pas la méthode qui nous manque; ce qui nous manque c'est la base même de la méthode.*[13] Out of this arose the question, *Does the Science of Linguistic Pedagogy exist?* We regretfully concluded that it did not.

(ibid., p. 5—6, italics in original)

This important realization that what was required was a principled basis for (the selection of) methods, in other words, in Palmer's formulation, a 'science of linguistic pedagogy' then gave rise to a new period of practical research work, this time with a new, higher purpose in mind. Thus 'with a view to laying the foundations on which the science of language-teaching might some day repose', he claims to have:

started on an organized series of researches [*sic*], submitting all sorts of methods to all sorts of tests under experimental conditions. [. . .] various types of exercises were designed, each one having its appropriate and distinct function to perform.

(ibid., p. 6)

The value given to research involving practical experimentation which remained largely hidden in *SSTL* and *PLS* but which was to re-emerge in Palmer's approach to reform in Japan can be seen, then, to have had its roots in his early work in Verviers. Indeed, many of the specific principles and procedures which were incorporated into *SSTL* were reported by Palmer (1917, p. 6) as having had their roots in the practical research along various lines of approach that he carried out from around 1908—09 onwards, with his own students in the *Institut Palmer*.

From this perspective it can be seen that Palmer's London work, in particular *SSTL*, largely involved *consolidating,* synthesizing and theorizing findings from a previous period of intensive practical experimentation in Verviers. Beyond particular principles and teaching procedures, the inductive, eclectic and practice-oriented 'research' approach he had adopted in Verviers was later to inform, in particular, the scheme of work proposed in the *Memorandum* and associated research and development work for the reform of English teaching in Japan. Palmer's view of research, derived largely from his early work as an innovative language teacher, was, then, very much intertwined with practice: 'experiment' for him involved trying out different types of teaching approach or material and comparing results, while a 'scientific' approach primarily meant developing general principles *on this basis* of experience and experiment, rather than by means of applying linguistic or other theory in a top-down fashion. The overall 'scientism' of his London publications (in

particular, *SSTL*), from this point of view, can therefore be reinterpreted as a kind of *post hoc* justification, or an 'overlay', for ideas derived primarily from his prior practical experimentation as a language teacher.

Thus, Palmer was far from being simply a linguist — or, as Véronique (1992) describes both him and Sweet, a 'phonéticien-linguiste' — interested in the application of linguistic insights to language teaching. He strongly, indeed primarily, identified himself as a teacher, a reformer and a language teaching/learning theorist, with the value of theory and research, for him, consistently being viewed as dependent on the resolution of practical learning and teaching problems.

Concluding reflections

Palmer's emphases in *SSTL* on the value of a 'scientific basis' for language teaching and — beyond this even — on the need for the establishment of an independent new discipline which would link language teaching theory, research and practice, mark him out as a highly original thinker and seem to fully justify Stern's description of him as the 'father' of, at least, British applied linguistics (cited in the Introduction). This assertion needs to be qualified in several ways, however. Firstly, Henry Sweet and other Reform Movement theorists (see Linn, this issue) were themselves precursors of Palmer in a wider movement to establish a 'scientific' (in their case, largely phonetic) basis for language learning and teaching, although none of them appears to have called for the establishment of an autonomous 'discipline' in the same way as Palmer. Secondly, Palmer's 'fatherhood' of applied linguistics, when interpreted as *actual* seminal influence from his view of the theory—practice relationship to the conceptions of post-World War II applied linguists, has nowhere been clearly traced; indeed, in the present article I have emphasized aspects of Palmer's approach, in particular his relatively undogmatic, eclectic and experimental orientation to the development of methodology and materials, which were *not* in evidence within the relatively top-down (linguistics-driven) applied linguistics of the immediate post-war era.

As I have shown, there are dangers of anachronism when — in the absence of properly historiographical research — the ideas of a precursor of applied linguistics like Palmer are co-opted too readily to present-day conceptions, with similarities and supposed connections being over-emphasized at the expense of difference. In this article, by resituating Palmer's ideas and practical initiatives in their own context and by charting their development with reference to neglected writings and other sources, I have highlighted their originality and

specificity – indeed, their value as an *alternative* to more recent conceptions – not simply the way they can be seen to predate applied linguistics as established in the post-war era.

References

Barrutia, R. (1965). «Review: H.E. Palmer, *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*, London, 1917. A neglected classic», *IRAL* (*International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*) 3:1, 63—74.

Bongers, H. (1947). *The History and Principles of Vocabulary Control as It Affects the Teaching of Foreign Languages in General and of English in Particular* (2 volumes), Woerden, The Netherlands, Wocopi.

Brumfit, C. (1980). «Being interdisciplinary: some problems facing applied linguistics», *Applied Linguistics* 1:2, 158—164.

Darian, S.G. (1969). «Backgrounds of modern language teaching: Sweet, Jespersen and Palmer», *Modern Language Journal* 7:8, 545—50.

Darian, S.G. (1972). *English as a Foreign Language: History, Development, and Methods of Teaching*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.

Davies, A. (1999). *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics: From Practice to Theory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

van Essen, A. (2000). «History: from the Reform Movement to 1945», In Byram, Michael (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*, London, Routledge, 270—275.

Grève, M. de and van Passel, F. (1973). *Linguistique et enseignement des langues étrangères*, Paris, Nathan [as cited by Véronique (1992)].

Howatt, A.P.R. (1994). 'Palmer, Harold Edward (1877—1949)', in Asher, R.E. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Vol. 6, Oxford, Pergamon, 2915.

Howatt, A.P.R. with Widdowson, H.G. (2004). *A History of English Language Teaching* (2nd ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Institute for Research in Language Teaching (ed.). (1985). *The Bulletin of the Institute for Research in English Teaching* (7 volumes), Tokyo, Meicho Fukyu Kai.

Institute for Research in Language Teaching (ed.). (1995/1995). *The Selected Writings of Harold E. Palmer* (10 volumes), International Edition, Tokyo, Hon-no-Tomosha.

Koerner, E.F.K. (1978). *Towards a Historiography of Linguistics: Selected Essays*, Amsterdam, Benjamins.

Linn, A.R. (2008). «The birth of applied linguistics: the Anglo-Scandinavian School as 'discourse community'», *Historiographia Linguistica* 35:3, 342—384.

Love, N. (1988). «The linguistic thought of J.R. Firth», In Roy Harris (ed.), *Linguistic Thought in England, 1914—1945*, New York, Routledge.

Naganuma, N. (ed.) (1934). *A Commemorative Volume Issued by the Institute for Research in English Teaching on the Occasion of the Tenth Annual Conference of English Teachers Held under Its Auspices*, Tokyo, Institute for Research in English Teaching.

Palmer, H.E. (1916), «Some principles of language teaching», *Modern Language Teaching* 12:3, 65—74.

Palmer, H.E. (1917). *The Scientific Study and 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*, London, Harrap.

Palmer, H.E. (1917/1968). *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*, London, Oxford University Press.

Palmer, H.E. (1921a). *The Principles of Language-Study*, London, Harrap.

Palmer, H.E. (1921b). *The Oral Method of Teaching Languages. A monograph on conversational methods together with a full description and abundant examples of fifty appropriate forms of work*, Cambridge, Heffer.

Palmer, H.E. (1921/1964). *The Principles of Language-Study*, London, Oxford University Press.

Palmer, H.E. (1924). *Memorandum on Problems of English Teaching in the Light of a New Theory*, Tokyo, Institute for Research in English Teaching.

Palmer, H.E. (1929). *Report on Research Activities during the Year 1928—9*. [Supplement to *Bulletin* 59; Institute Leaflet no. 31.], Tokyo, Institute for Research in English Teaching. In Institute for Research in Language Teaching (ed.) (1985), vol. 7.

Palmer, H.E. and Palmer, D. (1925). *English through Actions.* ['This forming part of the "Oral Ostensive Line of Approach" of the [S]tandard English [C]ourse in preparation by the Institute'], Tokyo, Institute for Research in English Teaching.

Roddis, M.F. (1968). «The contemporary relevance of three early works on language teaching methodology», *IRAL* (*International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*) 6:4, 333—47.

Saussure, F. de. (1916). *Cours de linguistique générale*. Edited by C. Bally and A.Sechehaye with the collaboration of A. Riedlinger, Paris, Payot.

Sawayanagi, M. (1924). «Dr. Sawayanagi's Preface to the "Memorandum," translated from the Japanese text», *The Bulletin of the Institute for Research in English Teaching* 5, 3—5.

Sechehaye, A. (1934). «A personal tribute to Mr H.E. Palmer», in Naganuma, N. (ed.), 10—14.

Smith, R.C. (1998). «The Palmer-Hornby contribution to English teaching in Japan», *International Journal of Lexicography* 11:4, 269—91.

Smith, R.C. (1999). *The Writings of Harold E. Palmer: An Overview*, Tokyo, Hon-no-Tomosha.

Smith, R.C. (ed.). (2003). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language, 1936—61: Pioneers of ELT* (5 volumes), London, Routledge.

Smith, R. (2009). «Claude Marcel (1793—1876): A neglected applied linguist?», *Language and History* 52:2, 171—181.

Stern, H.H. (1983). *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Sweet, H. (1899). *The Practical Study of Languages: A Guide for Teachers and Learners*, London, Dent.

Titone, R. (1968). *Teaching Foreign Languages: An Historical Sketch*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press.

Véronique, D. (1992). «Sweet et Palmer: des précurseurs de la linguistique appliquée à la didactique des langues? », *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 46, 173—90.

Widdowson, H.G. (1979). «The partiality and relevance of linguistic descriptions», *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 1:2, 9—24.

Widdowson, H.G. (1980). «Models and fictions», *Applied Linguistics* 1:2, 165—170.

---

[1]   *Report of the University College Committee for Presentation to the Senate, Feb. 1915—Feb.1916*, UCL archives.

[2]   *University College Abridged Calendar for the Session 1916—17*, UCL archives.

[3]   *University College Abridged Calendar for the Session 1921—22*, p. 45, UCL Archives.

[4]   *University College Abridged Calendar for the Session 1918—19*, p. 38, UCL Archives.

[5]   Howatt (in Howatt with Widdowson 2004, p. 271) avers that '[d]espite its idiosyncratic terminology, the ergonic system [proposed in *SSLT*] was a serious contribution to the discussion of linguistic form at a time before academic linguistics had provided any practical alternative to the traditional "parts of speech" model'. Palmer offered a term-long lecture course on what he termed 'constructive grammar' for the first time in 1917—18, at UCL (*University College Abridged Calendar for the Session 1917—18*, p. 45, UCL Archives).

[6]   *School of Oriental Studies* […] *Report of the Governing Body and Statement of Accounts for the Year Ending August 31st, 1919*, p. 8, SOAS Archives.

[7]   *School of Oriental Studies* […] *Report of the Governing Body and Statement of Accounts for the Year Ending 31st July, 1921*, pp. 8—9, SOAS Archives.

[8]   *University College Abridged Calendar for the Session 1920—21*, p. 45, UCL Archives.

[9]   Thus, far from being an 'adversaire du maître de Genève' (de Grève and van Passel 1973, cited by Véronique 1992, p. 183) or having engaged in a dispute with Sechehaye about the distinction between *langue*

and *parole* (Véronique 1992, p. 183), Palmer professed his admiration for Saussure throughout his career, while Sechehaye (1934) expressed his basic agreement with Palmer's interpretation. Sechehaye's (ibid.) five-page assessment of Palmer's work is well-worth reading in its entirety and I hope to make it and the *Memorandum* available via the following link: http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/elt_archive/halloffame/palmer/archive

10   Thus, for example, 'I want to question the common assumption, axiomatic in its force, that a linguistic model of language must of necessity serve as the underlying frame of reference for language teaching. […] I think that applied linguistics can only claim to be an autonomous area of inquiry to the extent that it can free itself from the hegemony of linguistics and deny the connotations of its name' (Widdowson 1979, p. 9).

11   Anonymous report titled 'History of the Institute for Research in English Teaching', in *Bulletin of the Institute for Research in English Teaching* 1/1 (1 June 1923), pp. 2—3 (these quotations, p. 2).

12   'an applied linguist in the sense […] of being a linguistic researcher who gains his inspiration, who builds up his theory from the work he carries out in the area of language teaching'

13   'It is not 'method' that we lack. What we lack is a *basis* for method'.