

Landmarks

Harold Palmer

M.L. Tickoo

Harold E. Palmer (1877-1949), was a London-born early twentieth century linguist, phonetician, language educator, and author of over a hundred books, research papers and monographs. A school dropout, he started work as a learner-teacher at a school in Verviers, Belgium where he taught and experimented with teaching methods, and learnt several languages, both living and artificial.

A chance meeting with phonetician Daniel Jones on board a ship led to an invitation to teach phonetics at University College (UC) London. Palmer worked with Daniel Jones on several lesser-known languages, their grammars and methods of teaching. Jones was greatly impressed by Palmer's research on grammars and on the how of teaching languages.

Palmer's first published paper on language and how to teach it was entitled "Some Principles of Language Study", and came out in *Modern Language Teaching* in 1916. A critical study of this paper shows his exceptionally sharp eye for the hidden potential of long-forgotten ideas and a remarkable ability to transform such ideas for rich and rewarding use in language pedagogy. Several seminal ideas from the paper, and some of his other well-received publications, had their origins in the writings of an employee of the East India Company—Thomas Prendergast. In his two-volume *Mastery Method* (1864), Prendergast averred, "Sentences have within them a principle of vitality, (=generative potential) an inherent power of expressing many different ideas by giving birth to new sentences"

(p. 19). Prendergast's ideas on high frequency 'vocabulary islands', the importance of sounds as opposed to letters, and preference for the language of everyday use, also found a place in Palmer's work.

Years before Palmer, Prendergast knew the potential value of his ideas. However, he failed to exploit that potential in language teaching/learning mainly because of the restrictions he had placed on how best the learner should learn to master each type of sentence. Palmer transformed Prendergast's idea, produced his 'Substitution Method' and to show its use in formal teaching/learning, added to it his carefully worked-out plan on controlled and graduated progression of essential sentence types. The same year he brought out two practice manuals *Colloquial English* and *Colloquial French* (1916 a, b), for teachers in English and French classrooms. The 'Substitution Method', which Palmer conceived and was the first to explain the use of in planned 'substitution tables', has served several generations of language teaching practitioners.

Alongside his research with Jones and teaching at two colleges of London University, Palmer also published books on language and its acquisition. Several of those publications gained prominence at the time and over the years to come. Three of them are still referred to by applied linguists, language-teacher educators and students of English intonation. They are: 1) *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (1917), the first book that sought to

give language study a scientific base and design an 'ideal' curriculum and methodology built on it, 2) *The Principles of Language Teaching* (1921), which took forward the 'ideal' curriculum into a very meticulously explained practicable scheme of language teaching with a well-marked progression in neatly arranged stages, and 3) *English Intonation with Systematic Exercises* (1922), the first ever book on the English Intonation system.

In 1922, Palmer was offered a job as Linguistic Advisor to the Japanese Ministry of Education. Soon after assuming charge, he established a new institution and a new journal: 1) He headed the Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET) from the beginning and used it to enable ELT practitioners to participate in its activities and 2) its journal, *The Bulletin of the Institute for Research in English Teaching (BIRET)*, which he edited for twelve years, ten times a year. The first research journal in the world of ELT, the *BIRET* served as a forum for research-supported and experience-driven answers to questions on language and its teaching/learning. These two endeavours marked Palmer's avowed commitment to research-based answers to issues of value in the study of English language, its teaching and learning. A rank outsider given his lack of minimum essential qualifications and training, Palmer was in fact the first outstanding ELT practitioner to give himself wholeheartedly to research-supported answers. Of particular interest to students of ELT should be the fact that the first ELT journal started in London by A. S. Horn by in 1946 was modelled on *BIRET*.

Palmer worked not just in the role of a leading thinker and the most outstanding practitioner of reform in ELT curriculum, methodology and materials, but also made a number of original contributions to major aspects of applied linguistic scholarship. His main contributions include the following:

On 10 December 1923, he presented a Memorandum with his views on language and its teaching, through which he achieved two things. In it, he presented for the first time ever a well-argued psycholinguistic theory of language acquisition. More, significantly, Palmer worked out the practical applications of this theory for the design and development of instructional materials and classroom teaching, its basic principles, and essential procedures. Despite the fact that this memorandum still remains an almost closed book in the world of ELT outside Japan, it was unique in the way Palmer related theory to the how and what of TEFL. A work of exceptional influence, it laid the foundations of a well-argued psycholinguistic theory and was even translated to serve the needs of a principled linguistic pedagogy.

Long experience of working with local teachers in local contexts of teaching in the Orient made Palmer aware of a significant fact—that whereas most of the work done by his predecessors and contemporaries was meant to be used to improve the quality of ELT in Japanese and other similarly placed classrooms, it appeared to rest on a major misunderstanding that English overseas was taught by native speakers who being born to it, had very few problems in its teaching. The truth however was that a) most English teaching in these schools was done by non-native teachers of English who needed to learn not only the language but also the how of its teaching and b) not everyone who uses English as their mother tongue is qualified to teach it to speakers of other languages. This was something that most native English speakers of the time and even those of our time seem to be unaware of. This awareness necessitated the preparation of new sets of materials for different objectives, aimed at teachers of English in Japanese Middle-Grade schools. The principles that governed the design of those new materials, including a few complete courses,

were explained in several reform-focused articles Palmer brought out during this period.

During his last years in Japan, Palmer continued to work towards his commitment to Japanese ELT. He encouraged and enabled Japanese-speaking teachers to appropriate the reformed methods of teaching associated with the IRET, Tokyo, with or without additions and adaptations. It is noteworthy that in a few cases, Palmer's efforts were successful in spreading the reform by helping the practitioners take ownership of the reform for successful dissemination. Palmer also became one of few pioneers in the fast growing ES(F)L world to collectively contribute to the movement for the reform of ELT at a time when English had begun to assume the role of a world language. He made outstanding contributions to the movement for vocabulary selection, distribution and control which resulted in *A General Service List of English Words* (1953).

Palmer also made sizeable contributions of great value to three aspects of English language—its grammar, vocabulary and sound and intonation system. A brief word on each follows.

Grammar

Palmer's books on English grammar show his great ability to work at several levels and towards several different aims. His first book *A Grammar of Spoken English on a Strictly Phonetic Basis* (1924), was the first ever book on English grammar with educated everyday speech as its aim. In the absence of any ready-to-use corpus of spoken English, Palmer made a systematic record of his own speech as a speaker of the language over several years which formed the sole corpus for this well-received first-ever book on the grammar of English speech.

Palmer produced two books of grammar for EFL classroom teaching. The first was entitled *A*

Grammar of English Words (GEW); that individual words have their own grammars may be seen as a contradiction since pedagogic grammar normally deals with rules of a language and their exceptions. However, Palmer's *GEWs* welled in his long exploration of problems faced by foreign learners in gaining mastery over English. The *GEW*, as also Palmer's articles (on the anomalous finites, count and un-count nouns, etc.),—once again the first of their kind—along with his work on verb patterns of English, stand out as highly valued additions for both teacher and learner in mastering the language. The *GEW* also served as a model for the *Advanced Learners' Dictionary (ALD)*, which has since grown into an unparalleled source of support for advanced learners and teachers of English.

Palmer's second book on English grammar for learners and teachers, *The New Method Grammar*, was unique both in its conception and execution. Through this book, he attempted to show how the sentences of English were comparable with the network of railway lines which made up a railway system. Palmer believed in pattern grammar with such dedication that he not only made it into a book for EFL teachers and learners, but he also built it in brick and mortar in his country house in Felbridge, Sussex, England. Of it he wrote:

Possibly those who will admire the miniature scenery will stop to examine the layout of the miniature railway, and by so doing will see how a complicated subject may be made easy by dint of showing it as it is. (*BIRET*, vol.134, May 1937, p.16)

Palmer thus made remarkably valuable contributions at different levels to the grammar of English and its teaching and learning.

Vocabulary

The study of selection, distribution and usage of vocabulary were paramount in Palmer's work

ever since he began work as a learner-teacher at the beginning of the century. He put together vocabulary lists from as few as 100-500 words, to as large as 3000 words. From 1904, he engaged with English vocabulary as both an enjoyable hobby as well as a significant part of his professional life. His contributions to vocabulary include: a) his work on defining the word 'word' and studying both what he designated as 'less than a word' and also the various combinations of words, b) writing books—singly and with others—using the minimum essential words and explaining the nature of problems and support mechanisms required in doing so, c) over the years identifying the factors that required attention in making lists for language teaching for different users and differing purposes, d) putting together the first ever classified lists of English collocations whose nature and uses he was also the first to make known, e) discussing the factors other than frequency, needed to put together the smallest and yet the most productive lists of words, and contributing to the ideas that governed the making of the *General Service List of English Words* which continues to add value among both ELT practitioners and lexicologists.

Phonetics

Palmer believed in phonetics with a commitment that at times came close to fanaticism. He wrote books and articles on a vast array of themes related to pronunciation, its study and teaching/learning. Apart from his belief in RP as the best model for learners, he firmly believed that phonetic transcription and teaching language as speech came first and had to form part of initial lessons in learning a language whatever the aim or circumstances of learning might be. Palmer stood by this theory in the case of his daughter, who he compelled to learn English through reading materials produced using phonetic

transcription. He did not allow her to make use of books written in traditional orthography.

Although Palmer's first book on English intonation (1922), the first ever on the subject, received high praise, he later gave it up in favour of a system which was based on drawings to serve as mnemonics (1933). Palmer wanted to make the English intonation system easily accessible to both the school teacher and the foreign learner. In fact the main objective of most of his work on phonetics was to provide reliable support to foreign language teachers. To this end, he worked hard and long, producing books and learning materials at various levels and for differing objectives. His love of phonetics was reflected even outside the language classroom. On several occasions in Tokyo as also in London, he changed the words in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta ending thus, "My mission, my ambition is to be the living model for the perfect phonetician" (Anderson, 1971, p.219-220).

In 1930, Palmer published his book, *The Principles of Romanization with Special Reference to the Romanization of Japanese*. Soon afterwards, the Imperial University of Japan in Tokyo conferred on him a doctorate degree for his books on spoken English, intonation and Romanization.

Despite having made a number of first-ever contributions to both language and its acquisition that covered a remarkable range and inclusiveness, and for being perhaps the first applied linguist to bring scientific scholarship to language teaching and learning, Palmer did not receive recognition among academics in his home country. ELT practitioners across the world, however, saw value in his work, as did several US-based scholars and practitioners. In recent times, Palmer has gained somewhat fuller recognition. In 2005, for example, Richard Smith

at Warwick University, England acknowledged part of the debt British ELT owes Palmer:

The main methodological roots of post-war ELT lie not in British experience in Asia and Africa, nor within the (at that time very limited) UK-based teaching operation, nor in any confident application of linguistics comparable to that which occurred during and after World War II in the U.S.A, but instead in work carried out before the war in Japan (p. xvii).

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*For a more comprehensive list see Tickoo, 2008.

M.L. Tickoo worked as Professor & Head of Research Coordination and Materials at CIEFL (now English and Foreign Languages University) Hyderabad during 1963-1984 and Head, Specialists' Department, RELC, Singapore (1983-96) and Editor RELC Journal 1985-1996. His interests include language education, ELT and materials.

makhan.tickoo@gmail.com