

Q & A with Rhona Stainthorp



British reading researcher Rhona Stainthorp reflects on her greatest influences, barriers to improvement in the teaching of reading, and a lifelong passion for books. ►

About Rhona

It's difficult to give you my background without seeming rather smug because I was born in Lancashire in 1945, so I am one of the luckiest generations in the UK. World War II had just ended; the Labour Party had been voted into power; yes, there was food rationing, but our diet was really healthy; the National Health Service was about to be introduced; and I was born into a family who believed education was of paramount importance. My parents also believed that girls had the right to have no boundaries placed on their aspirations. I have four degrees and never once had to pay the fees. Every degree was supported by the state. My grandchildren, should they choose to go to university, are likely to leave with a debt of more than £50,000 – that's around A\$90,000. Many of my generation have been very privileged, but we have been profligate curators.

Right now, the UK feels to me to be an unsafe, prejudiced, inward looking, society. The Brexit referendum has unleashed some really unpleasant tendencies. I just have to hope that we can pull back and rebuild ourselves as a caring egalitarian country before it is too late. On the positive side, we are so much more successful at teaching our children to read, so if they exercise their critical faculties, the next generation may lead us forward to create a better future for themselves.

I'm reaching the end of my working life, but I've not quite got there yet. I still give a few lectures and have the joy of supervising doctoral students. They certainly keep my brain ticking over. And I've got enough data to keep me writing for a few years yet. How do I fill the other daylight hours? I do Tai Chi and Qigong. But more importantly, I've taken up running and doing triathlons with my husband. Only short distances – but I'm convinced that I'd have made the Olympics if only I started 60 years ago.

Rhona, how did you first become interested in research in reading?

If I was being romantic, I would say at about 68 years ago. I have some artefacts that my mother kept from my childhood, which show that I was obviously obsessed by alphabets. There

are lots of illustrated ABCs with an object for each letter sound. I'd already decided that phonics was a positive thing. However, in what seems like a life time ago now, my first job was as a teacher in a boys' secondary modern school in outer London. This was at a time when 11-year-olds in England sat the 11-plus exam. This determined whether they would go to a grammar school or a secondary modern school. If they went to a secondary modern, they left education aged 15 years with

*Given that my PhD
research was going
nowhere fast, I applied
for, and was lucky to
get, jobs lecturing in
psychology*

no academic qualifications. My head teacher did not support this policy and simply ignored it, so remarkably, pupils were given the opportunity to take public examinations and stay on into the sixth form to study for A-levels and even apply for university. I was teaching A-level British Constitution to the older pupils but also taught history to the youngest. The range of ability was huge and, along with potential university candidates, there were boys who could barely read or write. My one-year postgraduate teaching course had not given me the skills to support such pupils, so I decided to apply to do a second degree in psychology at Birkbeck College in the hope that this would give me some insight into how to help them. At this stage I was not thinking about doing research myself – I just wanted answers. Birkbeck is an unusual, indeed unique institution in the UK, because all undergraduate degrees are taught in the evenings. Also one has to have a day job to be registered. Birkbeck students double up on life even to this day. Studying psychology was the most intellectually exciting time of my life. I just delighted in every module I studied, but in the end got 'side-tracked' into developmental memory. I went to the University of Reading to begin a PhD into visual memory and hated it! I was a disaster. However, there was one good result about my short time there – I met a young lecturer called Max Coltheart.

Given that my PhD research was going nowhere fast, I applied for, and was lucky to get, jobs lecturing in psychology, first at a college training speech and language therapists and then at a teacher training college. And the rest, as they say, is history. At the teacher training college I was asked to run an elective module called The psychology of reading, so the obvious thing to do was to contact Max and ask for a reading list. He recommended Gibson and Levin's *The Psychology of Reading*. This was the perfect book to help me bootstrap my way into reading research and to return to my aim of finding out about how people learn to read and write.

This was all at a very strange bleak period in the teaching of reading in the UK – the mid-'70s and -'80s. At that

time, student teachers were generally told that learning to read was the same as learning talk – we don't teach children to talk so we don't need to teach them formally to read. Wrong in every possible way. The Whole Language approach to teaching reading was the orthodoxy with Goodman and Smith being the required texts. My module stood out like a sore thumb. I expected students to read the empirical evidence about how people read words, and how this evidence might impact on pedagogy. I still occasionally hear from old students who tell me how grateful they were that they signed up for the module. The research evidence, even at that time, was overwhelming that children have to be taught HOW to read words: they will not just learn by osmosis. Every teacher will tell you, one learns most from one's students, so in order to answer my students' questions, I had to begin to conduct research myself. This was the start of 35 years of researching reading and writing development.

Who has most influenced your thinking about reading and why?

I'm going to treat "who" as a plural pronoun. The first in my list must be Max Coltheart. During my abortive time as a PhD student at Reading, one good thing was the opportunity to attend his classes on cognitive psychology and be privy to seminars and discussions where the Dual Route was being developed. This really whetted my appetite and made so much sense when considering the development of word reading. I used it as a framework for my teaching.

In order to gain a more rigorous training in research into reading I then decided to sign on first for an MSc in Human Communication and then a PhD, both at the Institute of Neurology in London. The person who supervised both my MSc dissertation and PhD was Maggie Snowling. I had first met Maggie when she was a PhD student under Uta Frith at UCL and I was teaching at the Speech Therapy college. I needed help in providing small group discussions for the students and Maggie applied for the post. When I left to have a family and take up a job in teacher training, Maggie replaced me. The teacher became the

student and as far as I was concerned, there was only one person who I wanted to start me out on a research career, and that was Maggie.

Then there is Morag Stuart. Morag had been a primary teacher in London in the time of Whole Language. She had also taken the high road to Birkbeck, but by this time Max had moved from Reading to take up a chair in the psychology department there. This meant she was able to do her PhD with him as her supervisor and subsequently

*When the Whole
Language point of view
held sway in the majority
of training establishments
in the UK, standards in
reading were poor*

move from teaching infants to teaching Birkbeck undergraduates. At that time, Maggie was running a reading group for her PhD students and in 1988 we all read Stuart and Coltheart, Does reading develop in a sequence of stages? Well, Birkbeck was just across the park from Maggie's office so I strolled over one day to introduce myself to Morag. Ten years later we became colleagues at the Institute of Education in London. I've just realised that she and I have not stopped talking about reading for the last 30 years.

The one thing that Max, Maggie and Morag all share is a high level of intellectual curiosity, an ability to ask insightful questions, and the creative powers to design studies to answer these questions. And they share a generosity of mind to support colleagues and students.

Psychologists working in university education departments and/or researching reading, reading development and reading teaching in the UK are very small in number. This can make intellectual life quite lonely. Morag had the idea of starting a group for researchers in different universities to meet in a supportive environment on an occasional, informal basis. Initially the group was called Work in Progress, but the acronym WIP didn't have quite the right tone, so in the end we came up with Forum for Research in Literacy and Language: FRiLL. This group has gone from strength to strength over the years. PhD students have gained academic posts and grants, and are making significant contributions to reading research in the UK. One noteworthy output from FRiLL has been the development of the Diagnostic Test of Word Reading Processes: the only UK standardised test of regular, exception and nonword reading accuracy. The impetus for the development of this test was [a paper by] Coltheart and Leahy (1996).

You will begin to identify a spider's web here – everything is connected.

What do you consider to be the most important contribution you have made to the scientific study of reading?

This is difficult because I have always worked collaboratively, so I don't

think it is possible to identify a unique contribution. However, the first sizeable research grant I obtained in 1993 was to make a longitudinal study of precocious readers. I had the foresight to appoint Di Hughes as my research assistant. She was a trained speech and language therapist and infant school teacher: the perfect combination of skills for the project. When I applied for the grant there had only been one study of such children in the UK: Margaret Clark's 1976 Young Fluent Readers project. This had been a retrospective study of a group of school children in Scotland with no comparison control group. Tucked away in the book was the information that these children seemed to have what was called good auditory discrimination.

I was already studying phonological awareness and its relation to reading, and it seemed to me that precocious readers could be predicted to have established high levels of phonological awareness, and specifically of phonemic awareness at an early age. The Young Early Readers project, as it came to be called, identified a group of four-year-old children who had not yet started school, but who had taught themselves to read. It was important that they had not been given any direct instruction in reading other than some informal exposure to print. It was also important to compare their performance and progress with an appropriately selected control group. Each of our young early readers was paired with a child of the same age, gender, SES status, vocabulary level, preschool group, and same prospective primary school. The control children also needed to have had good exposure to print but, as yet, no ability to read words. We initially studied them for three years until they were seven years old; then when they were 11 years old at the end of primary school; and finally in their 20s. We felt that there was a lot to be learned from children who found no barriers to reading. The main difference between the two groups was that the young early readers had exceptional levels of explicit phonemic awareness right from the start of the project and the control children, though showing phonological awareness at the level of the syllable

and rime, were not yet phonemically aware. A significant difference in phonemic awareness remained throughout the primary years and was even there in the young adults we were able to follow up into their 20s. This work, along with the work of so many other researchers, firmly established explicit phonemic awareness as being necessary for learning to read words in an alphabetic orthography. This leads to the conclusion that, when teaching phonics, it is important that teachers ensure their pupils are supported to develop explicit phonemic awareness. And following on from this, it is necessary that teachers in training have their personal phonemic awareness firmly re-established. It is not possible to teach phonics effectively if you yourself are not able to juggle with the sounds in words.

Could you recommend one of your own books or papers that you consider to be particularly important?

My paper, 'W(h)ither Phonological Awareness? Literate trainee teachers' lack of stable knowledge about the sound structure of words' addressed the issue of teachers' phonemic awareness. At that time in England we were slowly moving towards the policy that a programme of synthetic phonics should be introduced as the first approach to teaching children to read words. However, it was not recognised that, unless the teachers themselves had skilled fluent phonemic awareness, they would find it difficult to teach phonics accurately and effectively. Training courses had to change to ensure that student teachers themselves needed to be explicitly phonemically aware.

However, for teachers I feel Reading Development and Teaching, the book that Morag and I published in 2016, is particularly important. It took a long time to write because we wanted to ensure that we provided a really detailed but accessible examination of the processes involved in both word reading and reading comprehension. We hope we achieved our goal.

What do you consider to be the next frontier in reading research?

Well for me I think the next frontier is

not in reading research. It is in writing research. I know there is so much more to be achieved in reading research, but in terms of education I would like there to be a much greater focus on writing. The outputs from reading research have provided the perfect blueprint for tackling writing. We really need to develop the same rich body of research about writing. We have to remember that, in terms of life chances, students are assessed by the quality of their writing. Writing ability becomes much more of a gateway to success than reading. So the next frontier will be to identify what determines writing ability and how to teach writing effectively.

What do you consider to be the barriers to improved reading instruction in your national and/or state school systems?

Teacher training and teacher knowledge.

When the Whole Language point of view held sway in the majority of training establishments in the UK, standards in reading were poor. It was a time of quite distorted argument. Anyone advocating a structured approach to teaching children how to read words was held to be a right-wing reactionary. There was a complete lack of acceptance of the need to TEACH children to read directly, and the evidence arising from psychological research was ridiculed. As I have said, the majority of students did not study how people read words.

Such were the concerns about standards of literacy in England that a National Literacy Strategy was introduced in 1998. This went some way to redress the balance, but it was not firmly grounded in an evidence-based framework. Given that there were still concerns that we were not meeting the needs of pupils, Jim (now Sir Jim) Rose was commissioned to write a report about the effective teaching of early reading. This was published in 2006 and is universally known as the Rose Review. The recommendation of the review was that the Simple View of Reading should be adopted as the framework for teaching reading by all teachers. In relation to the word-reading dimension of the Simple View, the review further recommended that schools should adopt

systematic synthetic phonics teaching as the first approach to teaching children to read words skilfully. Ten years on, this has largely been adopted and taken out of the political arena. However, the majority of primary teachers working at the present time were probably trained in the Whole Language era or in the early years of the National Literacy Strategy, so they have less than optimal knowledge and skills in teaching phonics. In 2017, a team from the University of Reading (Naomi Flynn, Daisy Powell and I) plus Morag Stuart were engaged by the Department for Education to run Phonics Roadshows for teachers. These included sessions about how people read words, why phonics is important for early word reading, why it is important to raise your own phonemic awareness in order to teach phonics. The dual route was given in evidence to enable the teachers to understand that exception words like SWORD, GIVE, HAVE, CASTLE need a different approach from regular words like SIT, GOT, HIVE, CAST. We required participants to work together to analyse phonics teaching programmes and to understand the need for consistency and a whole-school approach. If the feedback can be trusted, teachers were very grateful. For many of them, this was quite revelatory and revolutionary.

Teacher training in the UK is very limited in time. The majority of teachers do just a one-year postgraduate course to become primary teachers. And increasingly, they are doing school-based training which may only involve one day a week in a university. In my view, teaching reading is an intellectually challenging activity that needs highly trained professionals who have engaged, and keep on engaging, with the research evidence. It takes a minimum of five years to train a doctor and then junior doctors have years more training which requires them to keep up with the latest knowledge, developments and innovations. The same should be the case for the training of teachers.

What sorts of books do you like to read for pleasure?

It depends. I come from a family who read crime fiction almost continuously.

We would discover an author and systematically work our way through all the books. I continue to do this today. At the moment I am working my way through Ann Cleeves' Shetland books. Then there is Donna Leon (which meant a trip to Venice and a boost in

Teaching reading is an intellectually challenging activity that needs highly trained professionals who have engaged, and keep on engaging, with the research evidence

my Italian cooking) ... Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, Kathy Reichs, Michael Stewart, Reginald Hill, Ian Rankin. The list goes on and on. But I'm not completely bloodthirsty. I love P.G. Wodehouse ... and he seems to stand the test of time.

In my book group, we try to choose books that will stretch us and lead to lively discussion. We love William Boyd and Ian McEwan. Unfortunately, this year we have set ourselves the task of reading a number of books almost as a penance. We seem to have universally hated Hilary Mantel's book on the French Revolution (*A Place of Greater Safety*) and had to conclude that we are a small group of philistines. However, as an antidote we treated ourselves to *A Tale of Two Cities*. What a joy Dickens is. We even read *Don Quixote* and were comforted to know that not everyone thinks it's great.

At the moment we are reading Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy. I read them all as they were first published and it seemed like a good time to revisit them.

What is your favourite novel and why?

An impossible question to answer. Fifty years ago I would probably have said *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. I was completely bowled over when I first found it and immediately re-read it a number of times. It was such a weird and wonderful world that Marquez had created. Then about ten years ago I revisited it. It doesn't work for me anymore and I am quite wary of revisiting some books just in case my memories are destroyed. So the favourite novel has to be one that I know I can read and reread and reread. It could be *Jane Eyre*. I read it every few years and still weep. It was a remarkable book for its time. The portrayal of Bertha is problematic from today's perspective, but Jane's strength and courage and honesty make her a powerful female icon. Then there is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The language is glorious and no reading researcher can go a day without quoting from Carroll... there's glory for you!