

12

BRIDGE¹

A Cross Culture African American Reading Program (1975–1977)

Patricia A. Young

Introduction

The design of educational technologies produced by and for African Americans has a long and rarely explored history. This chapter provides an analysis of the design, designers, and dormancy of *Bridge: A Cross Culture Reading Program* (hereafter, *Bridge*). *Bridge* was developed as an intervention reading program to improve the reading levels of black junior and senior high school students in America's public schools. The program was normed for inner-city black students in grades 7 to 12 who read between second- and fourth-grade levels. The curriculum included: reading Booklets One through Five, Study Books One through Five, a teacher's edition of the study books, six audio recordings, and a teacher's guide. The findings from *Bridge* revealed a skills-based reading program that under controlled conditions resulted in reading gains for African American youth at 6.2 months for 4.0 months of instruction compared to a control group that earned 1.6 months for 4.0 months of instruction. Teachers reported improvements in student behavior and an increase in students' motivation to learn with the *Bridge* materials (Simpkins, 2002).

This is the story of *Bridge's* design, designers, and dormancy. The design of *Bridge* is explored through a text and context analysis of the reading program. Excerpts from interviews with the designers of *Bridge* provide insight into the design process and designers. The dormancy of *Bridge* begins with public opinion on one side and the designers and publishers on the other. The reasons for this dormancy are further explored.

Bridge is analyzed and discussed as a living document that exists in the present day. A comprehensive analysis of *Bridge* can be found in Young (1999).

Discovering *Bridge*

As a graduate student, I found out about *Bridge* through a conversation with an African American scholar. I informed her of my interests in instructional materials designed by and for African Americans and she directed me to *Bridge*. I obtained copies of *Bridge* from a library. Then, I set out to locate the authors of the curriculum series as I explored similar instructional materials as part of my dissertation research. My interest was to disclose the product and process involved in creating this educational technology. The research questions included: How does technology influence the design and media of instruction?; How do instructional materials disclose their nature, and how is this nature culturally and/or linguistically specific?; How do macro and micro social, political, cultural, and economic issues mediate the text and context of a document?; and What elements of the design are believed to improve the education of the African American learner?

Gary A. Simpkins, Charlesetta Stalling (formerly Charlesetta Simpkins), and Grace Holt designed *Bridge*. After several conversations with the two living authors in 1999, I interviewed Gary Simpkins via telephone. Charlesetta Stalling invited me over for dinner in her California home, and I interviewed her thereafter. It was simply that these designers had a story to tell and finally someone wanted to listen.

The Designers of *Bridge*

The designers of *Bridge* were African Americans: a psychologist, reading specialist, and linguist, respectively.



Gary A. Simpkins (1943–2009) earned his Doctor of Education (1976) degree from the University of Massachusetts in the area of Humanistic Applications of Social and Behavioral Sciences (Figure 12.1). He entitled his dissertation “A cross-cultural approach to reading” (1976). Simpkins acquired a Master of Education degree from Harvard University in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts from California State University Los Angeles in Psychology. During his career he was a student activist, college professor, and mental health psychologist. Simpkins was born in Buffalo, New York, but he grew up in Los Angeles, California.



FIGURE 12.1 Dr. Gary A. Simpkins.



Charlesetta Stalling received her Doctor of Education (1977) degree from the University of Massachusetts in the area of Human Services and Applied Behavioral Science with an emphasis in curriculum development, teacher training, and micro counseling (Figure 12.2). She entitled her dissertation “Effects of the cultural context of language on the cognitive performance of Black students” (1977).



FIGURE 12.2 Dr. Charlesetta Stalling.

Stalling acquired a Master of Education (1972) degree from Harvard University in Education with an emphasis in Reading and a Bachelor of Arts (1969) from California State University Los Angeles in Language Arts. Her career enabled her to be a student activist, educational administrator, educator (K-12 and adult), and educational consultant. Stalling was born in San Diego, California and has spent most of her life in California.

Grace S. Holt (1922–1991) graduated from Spelman College in 1942 and acquired a teaching certificate from the University of Chicago. She earned a Master of Education in Inner City Studies (1969) from Northeastern Illinois State College. She entitled her Master thesis “A method of teaching Standard English as a second dialect to Black English speakers in elementary schools.” Grace Holt was a public school elementary teacher, college professor, and administrator in Chicago, Illinois.

The Origins of *Bridge*

Bridge was a spin-off of a program model called the Cross-Cultural Approach to Reading developed through Technomics Research and Analysis Corporation, a

scientific corporation based in Los Angeles. Simpkins was hired as a consultant on an instructional project that sought to address the massive reading failure of black high school age youth in “urban ghettos” (Simpkins, 1976, p. 135). Around 1969, Dr. Burton R. Wolin, Vice President of Research at Technomics, and Simpkins created reading and writing instructional materials that focused on the language and social experiences of this population (Simpkins, 1976). They wanted to provide these youth with reading experiences using Black English that paralleled their social and linguistic worlds and then guide students into the social and linguistic world associated with Standard English. The term “Black English” will be used throughout this chapter to denote the language of African American people; however, references to Black English have been termed Ebonics, Black Dialect, African American English, Black Vernacular, and Black/African American Language (Smitherman, 1994). The results of their tests on the preliminary and revised version of *Bridge* indicated that the materials were effective in improving the reading skills of black youth; however, further research and development were needed (Simpkins, 1976).



By 1973, Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company had formed an Urban Programs Department in their Educational Division; they sought to publish instructional materials for minority populations. Simpkins was approached by the Urban Programs Department because they heard of the success of his previous reading program. Thereafter, Simpkins agreed to develop an extensive reading program under two conditions. First, he must be allowed to choose his own team of writers; and second, Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company must field test the program in public schools. Further, if the field tests indicated that the program was not an effective tool for teaching reading to black youth, it would not be marketed. *Bridge: A Cross-Culture Reading Program* (Figure 12.3) was the product of Simpkins’ efforts with Houghton Mifflin Company. The program was extensively tested in Chicago, Illinois; Phoenix, Arizona; Washington, DC; Memphis, Tennessee; and Macon County, Alabama (Simpkins, 1976).

Design Thinking Behind *Bridge*

In these interview excerpts, Simpkins discussed the process involved in developing *Bridge*. He began with his preliminary research and then shifted to how they

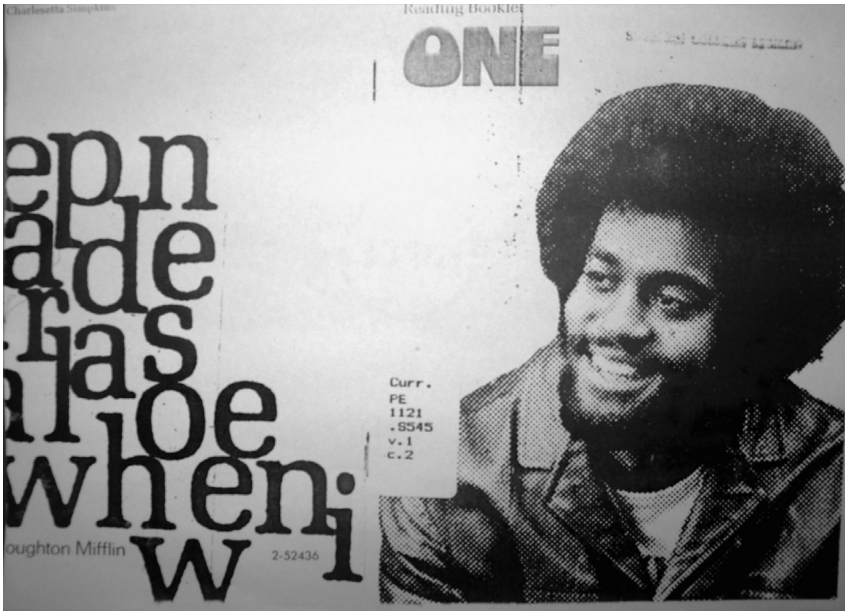


FIGURE 12.3 Book One.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977d.

sought to fill the gaps in student learning. This is an account of the design thinking involved in creating *Bridge*.

[In] the preliminary research I went around talking to black kids. “Why can’t you read my man. I mean you seem smart, you obviously have great language facility, you know.” “Ain’t got a damn thing I want to read.” “Okay, I’ll buy that.” But they didn’t have any materials that interested them in reading. Also they had gaps in their learning. They were bright kids, but there were gaps in their learning that prevented them from putting the reading skills together. And that’s what we aimed the Bridge program at, to fill those gaps in their learning. We knew we were going to get data from this population that was good. Because these kids have learned a great deal about reading, but they just haven’t put it together. They have been sitting in class all these years and [have] not learn[ed] ... about reading Standard English. What the kids lacked was code switching ability. That is, ... they didn’t know when ... their dialect stopped and Standard English began so the [language] populations blended together and gave them a lot of problems.



And we kept trying to hammer it home [that] ... we are not trying to hammer the kids into Black English. In fact, we want to move them from Black English to Standard English, but we don't want to devalue Black English. Because we think that it is really important that the kids be bidialectal. We don't want to take anything from the kids. We want to add on to what they have. We want our kids to be able to go to Harvard and be articulate. And go in the middle of Harlem you know and also be articulate you know in the dialect. So we want our kids to have those code switching abilities.... And from a natural point of view, they should not be having these problems, because these kids have high language facility to carry on. These kids are highly verbal and know how to manipulate the language metaphorically and everything else in the language but somehow it doesn't carry over to Standard English. And so that's what Associative Bridging was about to take the strength of their language and carry it over to Standard English. To show them that these are two separate populations, they can blend together, we can pull them apart. Here's where one starts. Here's where one begins. And also show them that here are the skills for instance. I want the kids to learn about metaphors. So I give them a nice white metaphor like "Oh trees we die at the top." They sit there and look at me like I'm crazy and what the hell is he talking about metaphors and similes ... and all that. But if I ... tell them about the beauty of metaphors, how rich the language [is]. And let's look at some metaphors. "Hey just take a chill pill" you know some of their metaphors let them be aware that they simultaneously create metaphors their language is rich in metaphors. And this is what enhances their writing and things like that. Kids grasp it immediately you know. Let them get the skills on their own bases and then they can transfer those skills over to Standard English you know. What happens is the kids sit there. The teacher is teaching in Standard English and many things are passing by. So they get those gaps in their learning. So this is an attempt to fill those gaps for the kids.

(personal communication, 1999)

For Simpkins, the process of developing *Bridge* began by learning as much as he could about his target population. He engaged in ethnographic analyses to begin the design process.

The Cross-Cultural Approach

Bridge was founded on the Cross-Cultural Approach to Education; it was a pedagogical approach designed by Simpkins “to accommodate the culture and language of Black non-mainstream” learners (Simpkins, 2002, p. 73). The Cross-Cultural Approach to Education bridged the void in learning between home and school. In this methodology, language was viewed as the nexus between what learners knew and were expected to learn. Thereby, instructional content began with the phonetic, syntactical, lexical, and cultural familiarity to the learners’ language. The familiarity to the learners’ language formed the cultural context for learning (Simpkins, 1976, 2002).

Associative Bridging and Peer Control were two teaching and learning strategies associated with the Cross-Cultural Approach to Education that became integrated into *Bridge*. The Associative Bridging strategy used cultural and linguistic knowledge to take the learner from the familiar to the less familiar. In the case of *Bridge*, Black English and non-mainstream culture would be the familiar and Standard English and mainstream culture would be less familiar. The Peer Control strategy was an “oral reading procedure” designed to provide learners with “control over the learning process” (Simpkins, 2002, p. 83).

An Analysis of *Bridge*

To evaluate the design of *Bridge*, a text and context analysis was conducted. Excerpts from this evaluation are included here with a more comprehensive analysis in Young (1999). Thomas N. Huckin’s approach to critical discourse analysis, as it relates to written text, formed the text and context analysis of *Bridge*. The text analysis provided an overview of *Bridge* in terms of its Genre, Framing, Omission and Backgrounding, Foregrounding, and Visual Representations. The context analysis provided a sociocultural analysis of the instructional materials (Huckin, 1995, 2002).

This section offers an examination of *Bridge* in terms of the product and the process taken to create this educational technology. This analysis includes all materials except for the teacher’s edition of the study books. Excerpts from interviews with Simpkins and Stalling provide accounts of the development process.

Text Analysis

Genre

Genre represented “text types” and these text types “manifest[ed] a characteristic set of formal features serving a characteristic purpose” (Huckin, 1995, p. 98). *Bridge* could be characterized as a curriculum unit or instructional materials because it included: (1) reading Booklets One through Five, (2) Study Books One through

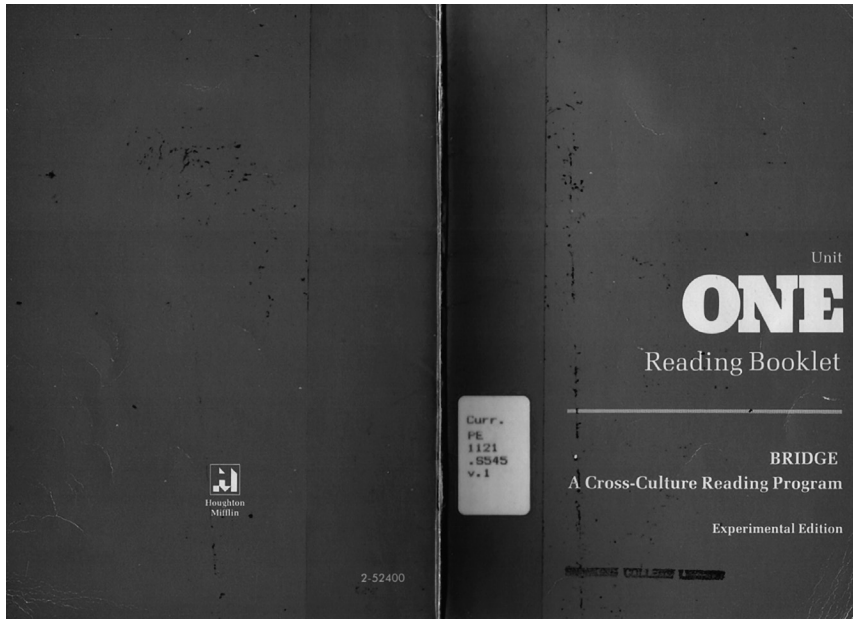


FIGURE 12.4 Reading Booklet One.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977d.

Five, (3) a teacher's edition of the study books, (4) six audio recordings, and (5) a teacher's guide. The reading booklets have blue cardboard covers (Figure 12.4), and the inside pages are printed on white paper. All other instructional materials are printed on $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ " paper.

Framing

Framing referred to the presentation of the content and its angle or slant (Huckin, 1995). The slant of *Bridge* appeared to be its design as a program specifically for inner-city black youth who failed academically in reading. For example, the teacher's guide opened with commentary on the Coleman Report and responded to the report's focus on the academic failure of black students across the country. The text stated:

Today it is not at all uncommon for seventh and eighth grade black inner-city students to score at the second and third grade level on standardized reading tests. Nor is it unusual for black inner-city students to finish high school reading below the fifth grade level. Because the students lack the functional reading skills expected of young adults in our society, the likelihood of their being able to compete successfully for

further education, job training, and employment is low. Regardless of their intelligence, these students frequently are considered—or consider themselves to be dull, ignorant, and backward. The urgent question ... is “What can be done?” ... Bridge is one possible solution. It is designed to intervene in the pattern of failure shown by black junior and senior high school students in this country’s public school systems.

(Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. v)

Stalling’s thoughts, from the interview, on framing *Bridge* with a focus on the needs of black youth, were:



[W]e looked at how black inner city children learn. We know they’re intelligent. We know they’re smart. We know they like to rhyme. Just like kids nowadays kids like to rap; before then it was playing the dozens. So we know that we like to shuck and jive and rhyme. Have the metaphors the similes and all that.... So yeah we wanted to meet the needs of kids. We wanted to let them know well that no one language or dialect is superior to another except in people’s minds. That’s why we start with that premise that you’re smart. You’re capable. You’re intelligent; therefore we’re going to build off of what you already know. That was the genesis. Build from what you know. Then people are more comfortable with it ... and then without putting down your language or culture we’re going to Bridge you to the Standard English which is very obvious that’s not hidden. But in a process whereby you know the similarities and differences because quite a few of our kids don’t know the differences.... Teachers don’t know the similarities and differences. So in a way we were educating teachers at the same time we were trying to educate the students to let them know its okay. And it’s up to you to decide when and where to use Black English. So yeah it was meeting their needs, making them proud of who they are.

(personal communication, 1999)

The designers’ frame captured an instructional spin specific to “inner-city” black youth’s heritage, language, culture, experiences, and interests (Simpkins, 1976). The plan was to acknowledge and respect black youth’s intelligence, build their self-esteem, and teach them Standard English.

Omission and Backgrounding

Huckin (1995) defined omission as the best form of backgrounding because what lies in the background is what has been intentionally or unintentionally omitted. Stalling commented that she could not:



think of any [intentional] omissions and as a writer you always think well did I include everything I should.... I think we were ahead of our times when we actually published it. And maybe now people ... [are] more ready for it. At this point, I can't think off-hand what I would change.

Stalling identified one thing that destroyed sales and ultimately the program—public opinion. The public was not ready for a reading program that incorporated Black English; its academic content proved inconsequential. Further, the public was not ready to acknowledge their own fears about Black English and speakers of this dialect. They reacted out of naiveté versus knowledge. The designers could not predict the general public's reaction.

Since *Bridge* was produced for student consumption on a national basis, there was a need to prepare the public. Rickford and Rickford (1995) suggested measuring the public's response to dialect readers. An evaluation of the public's reaction was unintentionally omitted in the design of the product. This indicated that the design of a product, for profit or for public consumption, must also consider the public's reactions and actions towards that product. Public reaction was a major concern for linguists in 1969 when dialect readers were introduced (Stewart, 1969; Wolfram & Fasold, 1969). Therefore, the design of a product must consider internal and external analyses (e.g., field tests, public opinion surveys, media trouble-shooting).

Foregrounding

Foregrounding focused on emphasizing specific concepts and de-emphasizing other concepts (Huckin, 1995). In *Bridge*, there proved to be conflicting views as to what was foregrounded. The public saw a program that focused on Black English, and the designers saw a skills-based reading program. Simpkins described the situation as follows:

[W]hen people look at the program all they see is that it has Black English in it. But if you really look at the program you'll see that it is a

well constructed skills based, theory based reading program ... for the kids. Black English is just a part of it. In fact, Jean Chall who was Harvard's expert on reading said she suspects that the gains came from other things in the program than Black English, and I told her she was right. Because people overlooked that it was a very well constructed reading program.

(personal communication, 1999)

Evidence to support Simpkins' contention that *Bridge* was a "well constructed reading program" and emphasized throughout the text can be found in the teacher's manual. For example, it read:

Bridge: A Cross-Culture Reading Program ... is based on a synthesis of insights generated both from the authors' experiences with inner-city students and from the new directions indicated by research in dialectology, linguistics, reading, cultural anthropology, and learning theory. Bridge places primary emphasis on language skills already in the student's repertoires, using materials representative of the student's cultural experiences.

Educators believe almost universally in the John Dewey axiom "Start where the child is." Many of today's linguists echo this axiom with the charge "Build on the child's cultural-linguistic knowledge." The validity of this pedagogical position has long been accepted by some teachers, but in the case of inner-city children it has been seriously ignored. Bridge draws upon both these precepts by starting with the students' primary language skills as a foundation upon which to build and motivate the acquisition of reading skills.

(Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 1)

On the other hand, the public reacted and emphasized what was "black" about the program instead of what was instructional. Blackness has been associated with negativity throughout much of contemporary history. In the interview with Stalling, she cited a book entitled *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* (Holman & Kometiani, 1995) to exemplify the tendency to associate black people with bad things. Although the designers sought to emphasize a skills-based program and de-emphasize that it included Black English, public opinion directed the program's perceived outcome.

Visual Representations

Visual representations also assisted in the framing of text (Huckin, 1995). In *Bridge*, photographs and sketches served as backdrops in Reading Booklets One through Five. The artists involved in creating these visual representations were

hired by Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company. Most of the black-and-white photographs and sketches depicted black men, women, and children in the garb of the 1970s. In particular, the men and women sport afros—a popular hairstyle—and bellbottoms (pants that flare below the shins). Plaid clothing in the form of pants and jackets was also worn by people in the photographs. Visually these photographs and sketches set the mood of the stories and helped students visualize a scene or the stories' theme.

The text analysis revealed *Bridge* as a curriculum unit focused on the development of black youth's intellectual growth, self-esteem, and command of the English language. Unintentionally, Black English became emphasized more than the skills-based reading program. The visual representations assisted in the cultural context indicative of the 1970s.

Context Analysis

The final stage in approaching the text involved analyzing the context to identify the social, political (Van Dijk, 1993), or economic occurrences within the text. In this case, the instructional materials emulated the time period and they vicariously represented black life and language.

The designers of *Bridge* included what they knew about black youth and incorporated research from areas such as learning theory, dialectology, linguistics, cultural anthropology, and reading (Simpkins et al., 1977b). The fictional stories and exercises were written in the “verbal, imagistic style of good Black English rappers” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 224). The materials tap the “orality of the black cultural experience and the interactive, tonal dynamics of black communication” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 224). If read today, the grammar and phonology reflect Black English; however, the vocabulary and idioms sound dated. For example, idioms like “hip you to that” or “dig on” are outdated, but other idioms like “cool” and “check this out” are currently used, though infrequently (Labov, 1995, p. 54).

Stalling talked candidly about her conceptual goals for *Bridge*:



Start where the kids are. Take them where they need to go in order to be successful. Start with the familiar. Schema. The metacognition type of activities. Bridging. We do modeling in it. When we first do the peer control reading the teacher models initially so the kids can see it. And then eventually they take over. The other thing we wanted

to do was to give kids more self control, in that whenever possible we tried to organize the materials so that it's based on some of Coleman's [1966] studies—sense of control, sense of locus in that whenever possible we let the students actually control the situation and let the teachers serve as facilitators or managers so that eventually we work ourselves out of a job. That was the other thing we wanted students to feel EMPOWERED—to know that they didn't need us. Once they understand[ood] the concepts and learned different things they could do it on their own.

(personal communication, 1999)

The design of *Bridge* was interdisciplinary and student-centered. The designers incorporated everything they knew and what research could tell them about educating black youth. They used Associative Bridging, a teaching-learning strategy, that allowed students to begin with the “familiar” (Black English) and then move into the “less familiar” (Standard English). Their theoretical perspective argued that Associative Bridging represents John Dewey's axiom “Start where the child is” (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 2).

Reading Booklets

In Simpkins' view, a central theme flowed throughout most of the reading booklets. He stated:



[S]ome of the stories had subliminal themes—why learn to read... because we found that the students didn't have good reasons for why [they should] learn to read. They were told to learn to read at a different time and a different place [and] you can be successful. You can be a doctor, lawyer... So, we tried to put [in] themes [like] learn to read because its functional now to your life and your community.

(personal communication, 1999)

The theme “why learn to read” connected to the political and social climate surrounding the education of black youth in the late 1960s. In particular, President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty placed the lives and education of black youth under the microscope of the government's hegemonic control. The extensive academic failure of black youth in America's public schools was at

issue. Johnson's sociopolitical programs sought to dissect the lives of inner-city black youth; however, this surgery left dismembered theories about deficits and deficiencies that continued to disease the educational progress of black youth. *Bridge* sought to provide an intermediary cure to the language-learning needs of African American youth. This reading program challenged the status quo curriculum and the politics of publishing instructional materials for public schools. *Bridge* answered the call to help re-educate black youth and refute the dismembered theories.

There were 5 initial reading booklets with a total of 14 stories. Only four stories will be reviewed in this chapter. All the stories featured black characters that were either labeled as such in the story or their racial identity was revealed in the story. Many of the stories sought to develop a positive self-image in black youth. Stalling stated the following in this regard: "if we feel better about ourselves, we have a better self-image ... so when we feel better about ourselves we do better" (personal communication, 1999).

BOOK ONE

Book One contains four stories, each written in Black English; they include *Shine*, *Stagolee*, *The Organizer*, and *The Ghost* (Figures 12.5 to 12.8). *Shine*, *Stagolee*, and *The Ghost* appear based on black folklore. The black folklore used in *Bridge* has been known as "oral epic poetry" or "toasts." This collection of folklore remains a product of African folklore meshing with the New World, the slavery experience, "the aftermath of slavery," and the "urbanization" of black people (Simpkins, 1976, p. 138). Smitherman (1977) defines toasts as "a variation on the trickster, bad niggah theme done in poetic form" (p. 157). In Simpkins' interview he recalled that the toasts began "historically when blacks were in prison—jail and they had time on their hands to sit around and write these toasts." *Shine* was one of the most popular stories for children and adults according to Simpkins.





FIGURE 12.5 *Shine* from Book One.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977d.



FIGURE 12.6 *The Organizer* from Book One.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977d.



FIGURE 12.7 *Stagolee* from Book One.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977d.

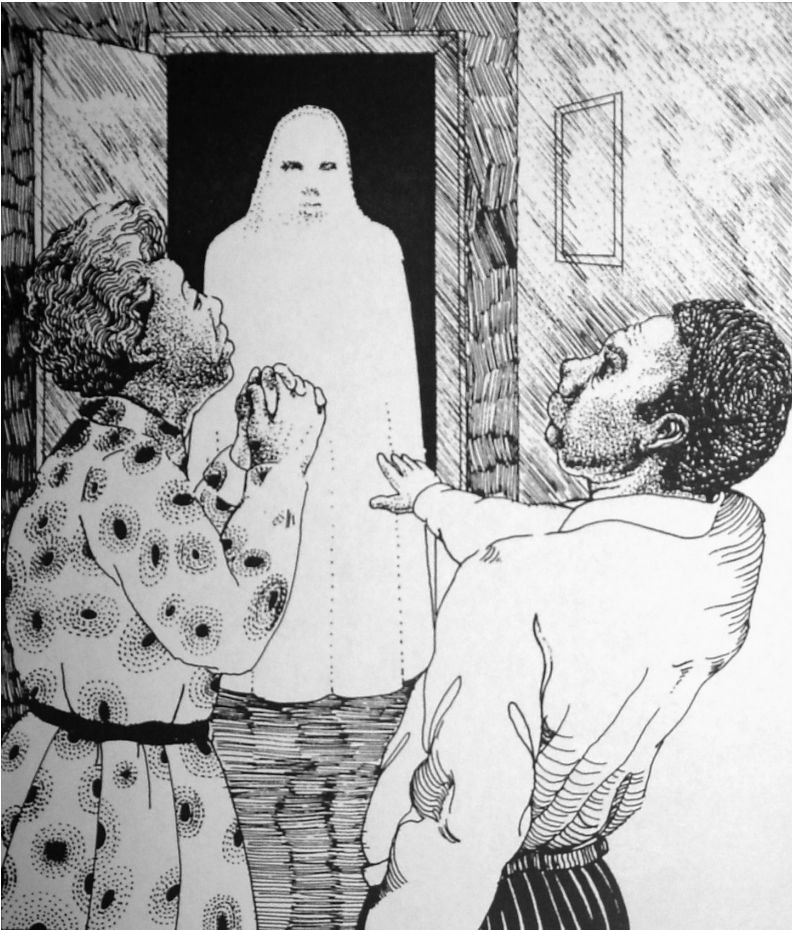


FIGURE 12.8 *The Ghost* from Book One

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977b.

These toasts held a cultural and linguistic significance for Simpkins. First, the stories represented the oral tradition experienced by him in his youth, and second, they were a part of his heritage. He explained in the interview that:

the original stories of Shine are filled with “mother fucker this”—“mother fucker that” and so we had to clean them up and make them presentable. When I grew up, we knew all these stories. We use to tell them to each other. But as time went by, black kids today lost their connection with the oral type of tradition—of black culture.

(personal communication, 1999)

In the story *Shine*, Shine is a black man and a stoker on a ship called the *Titanic*. As a stoker, he shovels coal into the ship's furnace. Shine warns the captain several times that the ship is sinking. However, the captain refuses to listen, and the ship begins to sink. Shine jumps off the boat and saves himself. From the deck, various people on the boat beg Shine to save them; however, Shine is the only survivor. The story begins with this introduction:

This story come from Black folklore, you understand. Black folklore is stories that Black folk have told and sung for a whole lot of years. This here story is all about Shine, a strong Black man! Maybe you heard other stories about Shine. Now come here and check out mine.

(Simpkins et al., 1977d, p. 1)

The introduction and the story are written in Black English and include idiomatic expressions used in some black communities. For example, the story begins:

You ever hear of the Titanic? Yeah, that's right. It was one of them big ships. The kind they call a ocean liner. Now this here ship was the biggest and the baddest ship ever to sail the sea. You understand? It was suppose to be unsinkable. Wind, storm, ice-berg—nothing could get next to it. It was a superbad ship, the meanest thing on the water. It could move like four Bloods in tennis shoes. It was out of sight!

But you know what? The very first time this here ship put out to sea, it got sunk. Can you get ready for that? On its first trip, this here bad, superbad ship got sunk. Now ain't that something?

Well, anyway, this here bad, superbad ship went under. Word was, there was very few survivors. Just about everybody got drown. But quiet as it's kept, they say that the one dude who got away was a Blood. Yeah, can you get ready for that? He was a big, Black strong Brother by the name of Shine.

(Simpkins et al., 1977d, pp. 1–2)

Shine seems to fit Smitherman's (1977) definition of a toast with a "bad nigguh theme done in poetic form" (p. 157). Shine was so "bad" (meaning good in Black English and culture) that he was the only person to survive the sinking of the *Titanic*. He was so smart; he was "superbad."

The idiomatic expressions evident in *Shine* include phrases such as "blood," "superbad," and, "out of sight." These expressions emulate those represented in the 1970s by many black people. The manipulation of language is an inherent part of black peoples' linguistic and cultural expression.

With text written in Black English, the black youth's reading task is just decoding. If these stories were written in Standard English their task would be to decode and translate (Baratz, 1969). These stories remain consistent with Baratz's argument that black youth should learn how to read in their own language and then be taught to read in Standard English. Baratz proposes that a dialect reading program would require Black English texts and transition readers. Transition means that a story is written in Black English and Standard English (Simpkins et al., 1977b). The stories in Book Two fit the Transition criteria.

BOOK TWO

Book Two consists of two stories: *Old But Not Defenseless* and *What I Got To Be Proud Of* (Figures 12.9 and 12.10). These stories are written in Black English and Transition versions. *Old But Not Defenseless* is Stalling's version of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In the Black English version, Geraldine takes the park route to get to her grandmother's house with sweet bread in hand; she runs into a strange fellow who wants to walk with her. Geraldine refuses his offer. At her grandmother's house, Geraldine's grandmother tells her how to defend herself.

In the Transition version of *Old But Not Defenseless*, Geraldine wears a dashiki and carries a bottle of wine to her grandmother's house. Geraldine has also been followed home by a man who poses as an insurance salesman; however, he just wants the bottle of homemade wine that she carries to her grandmother's house. (According to the designers, the wine was used in the Transition version because it was a move towards an American cultural norm—that is, bringing alcohol as a social gift). In terms of written texts, Black English reading materials should present authentic representations of the spoken language (Stewart, 1969). Thereby, authentic representations of black life and language could bring youth to accept and connect to the content area.

According to Stalling, these stories signified the importance of our elders and listening to one's parents. Geraldine's mother told her to go straight to her grandmother's house. It is part of black culture to speak when spoken to but "keep stepping," stated Stalling. This cultural fact is exemplified in the Transition version of *Old But Not Defenseless*:

It was so hot Geraldine decided to take a short cut through the park where it was cool. Geraldine mother didn't like her to go through the park. Geraldine could hear her mother talking now. "Weird characters be hanging out in the park. If you gotta go through it, go with a couple of other people. And step fast, child. If some guy say something to you, say 'Hello,' but keep on stepping in the direction you going. It's always better to speak than not to speak. 'Cause if you don't, they'll curse you out or go upside your head."

(Simpkins et al., 1977e, pp. 5–6)

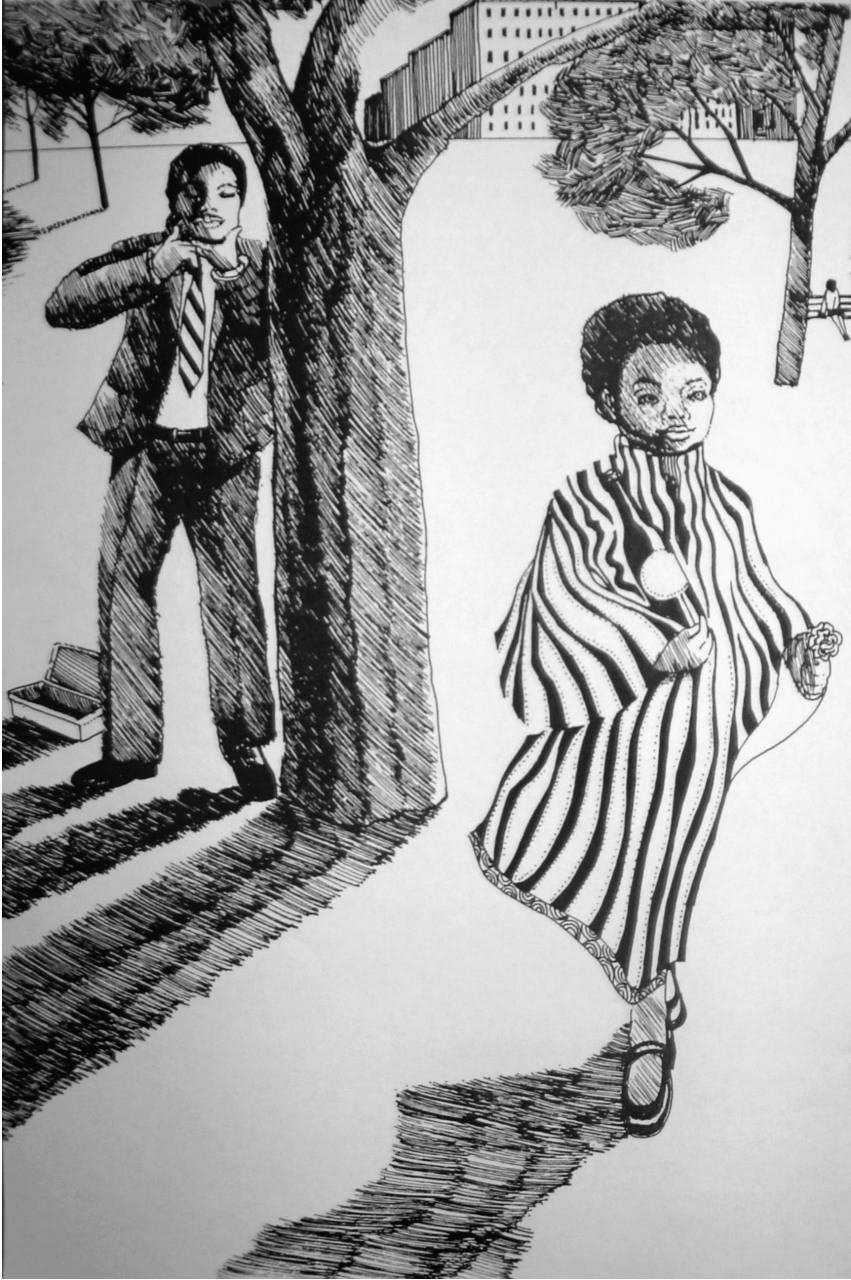


FIGURE 12.9 *Old But Not Defenseless* from Book Two.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977e.

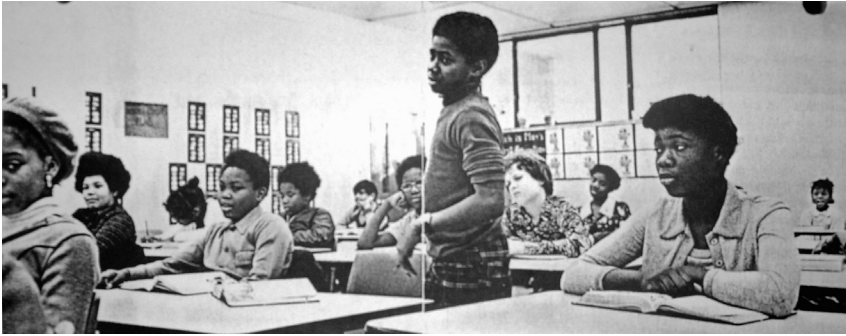


FIGURE 12.10 *What I Got To Be Proud Of* from Book Two.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977c.

This excerpt includes linguistic features consistent with Black English. In Black English “be” is used with adjectives to indicate an extended or continuous state of action as exemplified in the sentence “Weird characters be hanging out in the park” (Smitherman, 1994; Stewart, 1969). A second example is a word that omits the prefix; that is, “Cause if you don’t” in Black English for Standard English “Because if you don’t” (Stewart, 1969).

Old But Not Defenseless and *What I Got To Be Proud Of* exemplify Transition readers that move the child from Black English to Standard English (Baratz, 1969). These Transition stories proved to be closer to the basilect (Black English) than the acrolect (Standard English). They include more features of Black English and focus on the “orality of the black cultural experience and the interactive, tonal dynamics of black communication” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 224).

BOOK THREE

Two stories are included in Book Three: *Dreamy Mae* and *A Friend in Need* (Figures 12.11 and 12.12). There are three versions of these stories (Black English, Transition, and Standard English).

Stalling wrote *Dreamy Mae*. In the Black English version of *Dreamy Mae*, Mae daydreams that she is a princess with long golden hair; later a friend styles Mae’s hair and demonstrates the beauty of her natural hair. *Dreamy Mae*, in the Transition version, daydreams about having long golden hair. A school friend shows her a book about a black princess with natural hair, and Mae begins to realize the beauty of her own hair. The Standard English version of *Dreamy Mae* portrays Mae daydreaming that her hair is golden, and then dreaming that her hair is different colors (e.g., purple, green). In school, Mae is read a story by the teacher about a black princess and again she realizes the natural beauty of her hair.



FIGURE 12.11 *Dreamy Mae* from Book Three.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977f.



FIGURE 12.12 *A Friend in Need* from Book Three.

Source: Simpkins, et al., 1977E.



For Stalling the story had a social and personal meaning. She stated:

With Dreamy Mae. My mother is a beautician. My mother in law is a beautician and to them (whispering) straight hair is good hair. And I had always told my mother that nappy hair is good hair. We as black folks have the most versatile hair....You can talk to any beautician and they will tell you. We can straighten it. We can perm it. We can go ... nappy. We can braid it. We can do so many things with our hair and I truly wanted to show in that story two things. One, that our hair is versatile and good ... and two that we come from a long line of proud black people.

(*personal communication, 1999*)

Dreamy Mae represents the cultural stigma of kinky hair. Kinky hair is viewed negatively in some black communities. *Dreamy Mae's* message promotes pride in one's self-image, culture, and hair. For example, in this excerpt of the Transition version Mae meets a new friend, Barbara, and they sit down on a bench to eat lunch:

The two girls started to talk. "You know what I really want more than anything else?" Mae said to Barbara.

"No, what?"

"I want some long golden hair."

"What you want that for? asked Barbara.

"I read a story about a princess who had long golden hair. I saw her picture, and she was more beautiful than anything I ever did see."

"That's silly," said Barbara. "Golden hair wouldn't look right on you no way. It wouldn't look right on no Black people. You ever see a Black princess with long golden hair?"

"No, I ain't seen no Black princess at all."

Barbara had a small book about Africa with her. She opened it to a picture of a Black princess. Mae stared at the picture. She shook her head.

"That ain't no princess," said Mae. "She got nappy hair."

"She is too a princess," said Barbara. "Look at the book. It say so right here. Anyway, nappy hair is good hair. That's what my mama told me."

Mae was confused. She had never heard that nappy hair was good hair. It sure sounded strange, like "nappy" and "good" just didn't go together.

(*Simpkins et al., 1977f, pp. 21–22*)

Dreamy Mae maintains a strong focus on Black English in the dialogue and Standard English in the narration. For example, the sentence "No, I ain't seen no Black princess at all" demonstrates negation in Black English (Green, 2011). In Standard English, this sentence could be translated as "I have never seen a Black

princess.” The narration emulates Standard English as illustrated in the sentences: “Mae was confused. She had never heard that nappy hair was good hair.”

In Book Three, the two stories *A Friend In Need* and *Dreamy Mae* are written in the three versions. These variations help students understand the relationship between their oral language and the written language of the text. Students begin to distinguish between their spoken language and Standard English without the stigma of inferior or superior language forms (Leaveron, 1973).

BOOK FOUR

In Book Four, there are two stories: *Vibration Cornbread* and *Little Big Man* (Figures 12.13 and 12.14). Each story represents the black experience as written in Transition and Standard English versions.

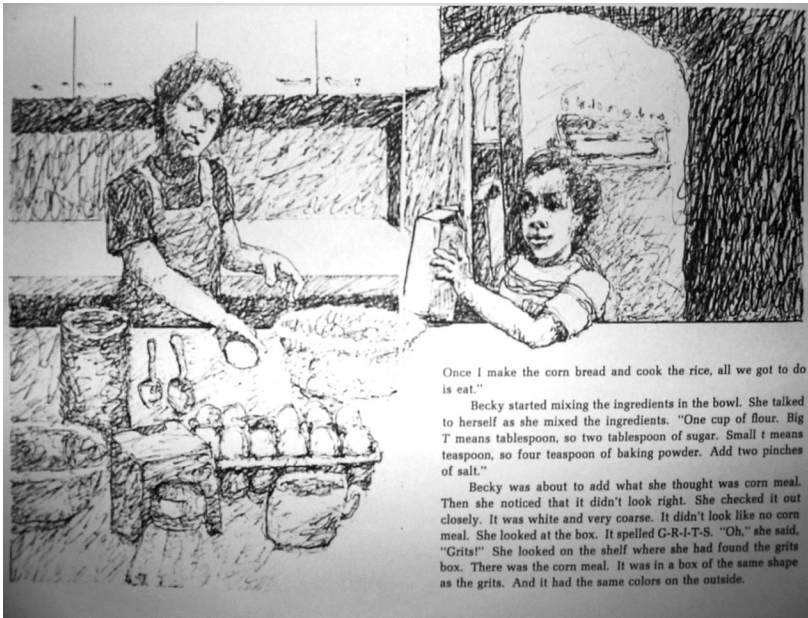


FIGURE 12.13 *Vibration Cornbread* from Book Four.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977g.





FIGURE 12.14 *Little Big Man* from Book Four.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977g.

The economic realities of black families are represented in both versions of *Vibration Cornbread*. In the story, two children cook dinner before their mother gets home from work. They are alone and managing the business of the house. This story held true for Stalling in her own childhood. She stated in her interview:

Vibration corn bread—latchkey kids. I remember ... this [is] one that I wrote. It wasn't based on any other stories ... other than my history. And my mother use to tell me. "I want you to bake a chicken. I don't want you to mess with that chicken. I just want you to put some salt and some pepper on it." Because I hate to do the same thing the same way. I like to be creative about doing things. So then my mother is a vibration cook in that even when I cook now I don't measure anything. I just dump it on whatever seems right. When I make something, it's never the same way. And I have friends who say, "why don't you write down your recipes." And so this is vibration cornbread.

(personal communication, 1999)

Stalling's experience as a latchkey kid was exemplified by the manner in which her mother organized their day. She stated:

[W]hat I started telling you about this story was my mother when she would go to work. She would set 3 clocks for us. One was to get up. One was for us to leave. And the third clock, we'd better be home before it went off, because we were supposed to be home from school, in the house and have called her. So we had three clocks to respond to a day.... Three clocks.... I'd call her at the beauty shop and let her know we were at home.

(personal communication, 1999)

Vibration Cornbread oozes the cultural tradition of vibration cooking. Good cooking has been a cultural norm passed down for generations in some black families. In this fictional youth story the children are learning this tradition, and they are learning to be responsible. The children have to assume the responsibility of managing the home until their mother arrives. Latchkey kids became so out of necessity because many parents could not financially afford baby-sitters or childcare centers.

The text of *Vibration Cornbread* parallels that of *Little Big Man* in that Black English moves closer along the continuum to Standard English. In this example of the transition version of *Vibration Cornbread*, Becky is cooking the way her mother taught her:

Becky added the corn meal. Then she added the milk and egg to the bowl and stirred it well. After looking at the mixture, she decided that it

needed more milk. “Mama say use your own judgment when cooking. Add a little bit less or a little bit more, depending on how you feel. Mama calls it vibration cooking.”

“Scottie, how’s this look to you?”

“I don’t know. I have to taste it.”

“Here, try a little taste.” Becky waited for her brother to say something.

“It taste OK. When it’s done, it should taste good?” said Scottie.

(*Simpkins et al.*, 1977g, p. 12)

Book Four exemplifies clearly that “there are two dialects in the education complex of black children” (Baratz, 1969, p. 111). In addition, these dialects can be blended in various ways when constructing the written text of dialect readers.

BOOK FIVE

Book Five contains four stories all written in Standard English: *I’ll Always Remember*, *City Folks*, *Dig And Be Dug*, and *What Folks Call Politics* (Figures 12.15 to 12.18). Each story is prefaced with a list of six to nine vocabulary words relating to the story. The content in the Standard English version parallels those in the previous booklets in that these stories reflect black people’s lives and communities. For example, in *I’ll Always Remember*, Shannon, a young woman, is conned into handing over her wallet to a “city slicker.” The story rang true for Stalling. She stated that sometimes people from the country come to the city and might say:

“Oh I’m so glad to get away from this hick town” [yet be] ... very vulnerable and very open to being ripped off. Because we have different mentalities—you know trusting people. Speaking to everyone you meet and then coming to the city and people misinterpreting it.

(*personal communication*, 1999)

In certain parts of the world where many black people reside, one may notice that greeting people is a part of the culture. These greetings may be exhibited as a smile, nod, or verbal expression. This cordial behavior is commonplace. However, when exhibiting this familiar behavior in a large city, a person may become a vulnerable target.





FIGURE 12.15 *I'll Always Remember* from Book Five.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977h.



FIGURE 12.16 *City Folks* from Book Five.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977h.



FIGURE 12.17 *Dig And Be Dug* from Book Five.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977h.



FIGURE 12.18 *What Folks Call Politics* from Book Five.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977h.

The transition to a total Standard English version is exemplified in *I'll Always Remember*.

Shannon got off the train. She walked to the baggage-claim section where people were pushing, shoving and pulling. She waited until everyone else had picked up their baggage. Then she put her coat over her arm and claimed her two bags. She walked outside to the taxi stand. There were no taxis in sight. Shannon sat on one of her bags while she waited. In this strange new city she felt very small.

A well-dressed man in his late twenties walked up to her. “Good morning. My name is William Henry,” he said.

“Hello, my name is Shannon Simms.”

“Please to meet you, Shannon. If you’re waiting for a taxi, you’ll have a long wait. They’ve all left for the city.”

“Oh, my!” said Shannon.

“It’s quicker and cheaper to take the subway,” said William Henry.

“It is?”

“Yes! It’s called the poor man’s taxi,” said Mr. Henry. “Where are you going?”

“To the Bronx.”

“I’m going there, too,” said Mr. Henry. “I’ll be happy to show you the way.”

(Simpkins et al., 1977h, p. 2)

Here the grammatical structure is consistent with Standard English. The research supports that by the time young people reach the Standard English version of dialect readers they should understand the relationship between their oral language and the written language of Standard English text (Leaverton, 1973).

Books One through Five demonstrate Stewart’s (1969) model for the design of dialect readers. Stewart (1969) envisioned readers that transitioned from Black English to Standard English. Although *Bridge* does not reflect Stewart’s vision of stories written solely by a linguist, it parallels his overall structure of using stages. Stewart saw the role of linguist as one who strictly controlled the grammatical structure in each version (i.e., each version would specifically focus on one aspect of Black English; for example, the copula—am, is, are).

Study Books One through Five: Activities

The Study Books (Figures 12.19 and 12.20) support the reading booklets by offering instruction in reading skills and practice activities. The activities include story questions, skills lessons, and word-bridging lessons. Then, students assess themselves using the feedback records.

Story Questions

Each story contains questions that correspond to the version (Black English, Transition, or Standard English). Story questions test students’ understanding of story topics and details. The three versions present different information on the same story. Questions are similar for each story but may yield a different answer. For example, the correct answer to the question, “How much money did John receive?” might be “a whole lot of money,” in the Black English version,

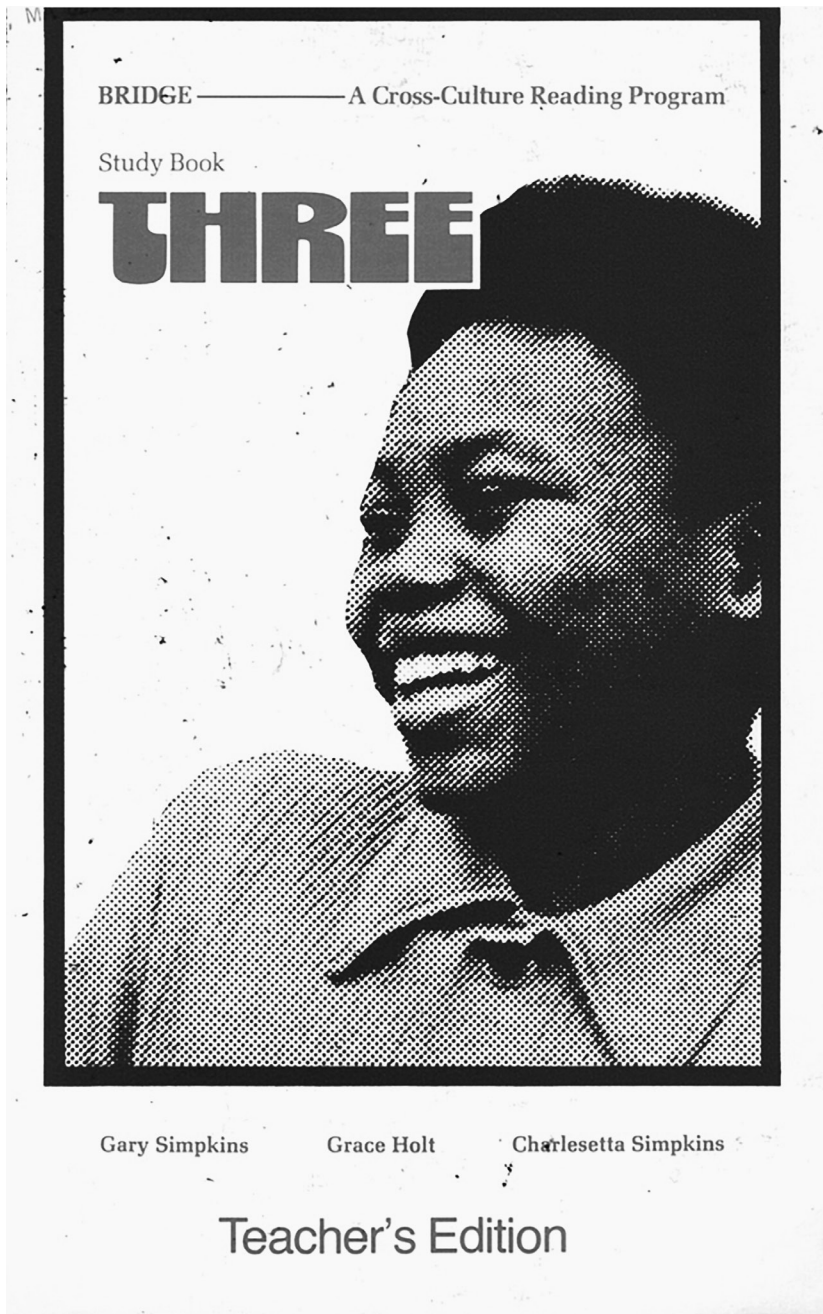


FIGURE 12.19 Study Book Three—Teacher's Edition.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977a.

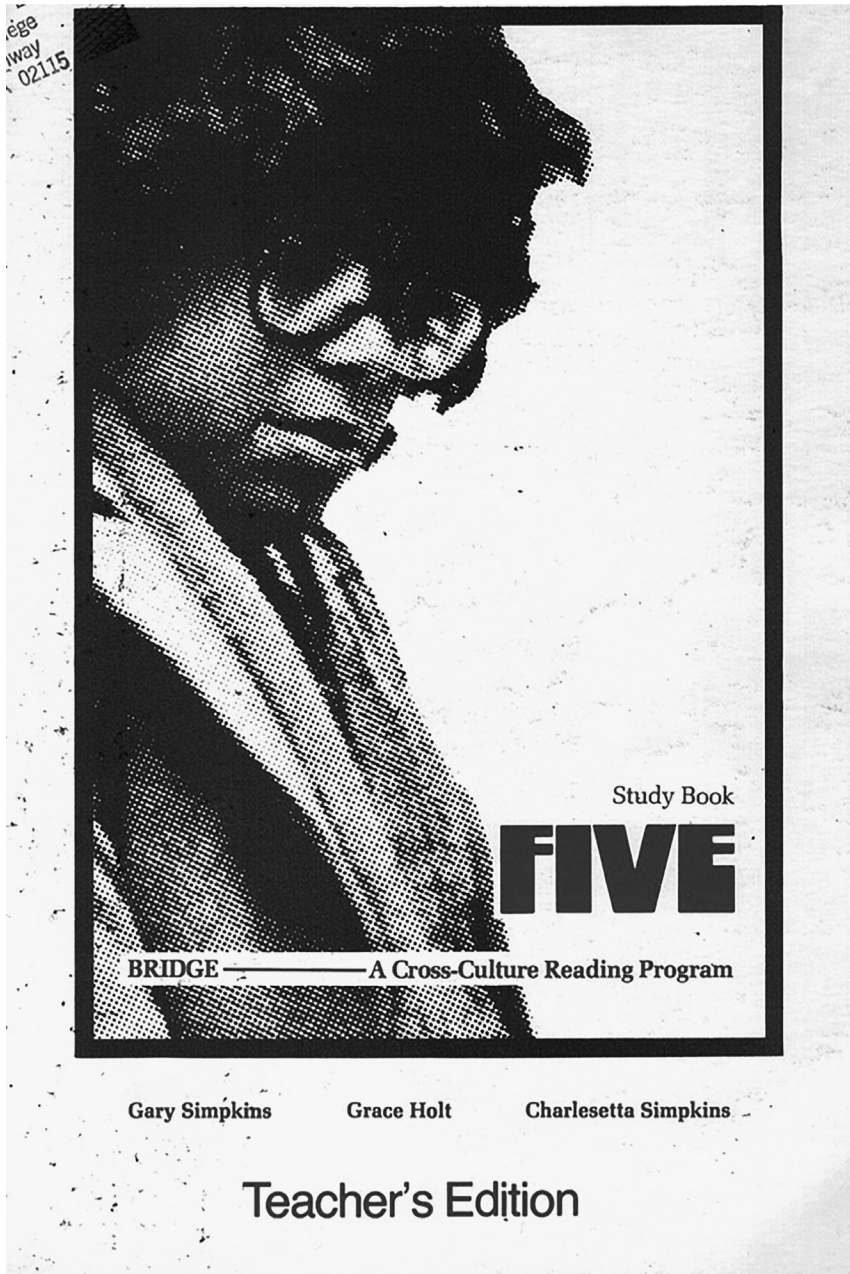


FIGURE 12.20 Study Book Five—Teacher's Edition.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977a.

“750 dollars” in the Transition version, and “500 dollars” in the Standard English version (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 5). There is a cultural significance to the change in the dollar amounts. In the Black English version, it is the norm in most African American cultures to keep personal business to oneself. In this case, the term “whole lot of money” brings with it the undertone that it is none of anyone’s concern or business how much money John received. In the Standard English version, responding with the answer “500 dollars” mirrors the dominant culture’s expectations that if someone asks you a question you should respond in the affirmative.

All story questions are preceded by audio- and text-based directions that seek to convey value and respect for the students’ culture. For example, the directions to the story *Shine* begins:

Go for what you know about the story “Shine.” Check out each sentence down below. Circle the letter of the correct answer (a, b, c or d). There ain’t but one right answer to each question so don’t be picking out two.”

(Simpkins et al., 1977c, p. 1)

This statement suggests that students should use their schema (prior knowledge) to comprehend questions and responses related to the story. Further, these words, written in dialect, bring equity and affirmation to Black English in its written form.

In the area of curriculum development and textbook publication, Black English has not been accepted, respected, or legitimized. Black English has only been accepted when the “dialect is presented within a work of fiction, especially when authors frame the representation of dialect by prose that demonstrates their command of Standard English” (Labov, 1995, p. 55). Dialect is accepted in mainstream literature but not in educational technologies. Delegitimizing Black English delegitimizes the people who speak the language.

Skills Lessons

The skills lessons, similarly, represent Black English and culture. These lessons assist students with their comprehension and application of reading skills (Simpkins et al., 1977b). The designers identified nine skills that plagued students; they included cause and effect, inference, figures of speech, key meaning words, main idea, meaning from context, time order, word order, and word parts. These reading skills are “rethought, extended and refined” in the three versions (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 6).

The designers stressed the importance of the “searching process” built into the skills lessons. This search process they believed to be more important than obtaining the correct answer. Students are provided with a limited number of

questions (four) to enable this process (Simpkins et al., 1977b). Thereby, students are allowed time to find answers. This searching process is usually not valued in higher grade levels and students are often rushed to find the correct answer. If students are allowed the opportunity to relearn this process, they can redevelop fluency in reading. Students who read slowly or take longer to comprehend are perceived to be slow learners and thereby deficient. *Bridge* allows students to relearn how to read in a supportive social environment. The curriculum supports students where they are and provides an environment conducive to learning.

The words and phrases used repeatedly in the Black English lessons reflect the language, experiences, and norms of black communities in the 1970s. This is exemplified through the Skills Lesson for Shine entitled “Digging on Figures of Speech”:



What you gonna learn from this: To dig on words that say more than what the words really mean. Check this out: You got a figure of speech when you come across a word, or some words, that ain't really saying what it seem to be saying. To understand this here figure-of-speech thing, to really get it together, you got to use a little taste of imagination. You can't be using the exact meaning of the words. What you got to do is trip on the picture that the words paint for you.

(Simpkins et al., 1977c, p. 5)

This excerpt demonstrates the incorporation of idioms and black linguistic norms. In the first sentence, the word “dig” means “understand.” Later in the paragraph, the word “trip” means “to think about.” An example of a skills lesson question that followed the above directions states:

- Shine was a stone swimmer.
- (a) Shine was a very poor swimmer;
 - (b) Shine was a very good swimmer;
 - (c) Shine was a stone.

(Simpkins et al., 1977c, p. 6)

These linguistic excerpts exemplify what Smitherman and Quartey-Annan (2011) describe as “language constructed as it would be used in a natural language

environment” (p. 264). The designers of *Bridge* sought to replicate the African American cultural experience throughout these instructional materials.

The same excerpt as the one above written in a Standard English version of *Dreamy Mae* begins: “Understanding Figures of Speech.” It read:

What you will learn: To understand words that mean more than what they seem to say.

Study the explanation: You have a figure of speech when the words don’t really mean what they seem to say. You can’t use the exact meaning of the words. To understand the meaning of these words, you have to use your imagination. What you have to do is understand the picture that the words paint for you.

(Simpkins et al., 1977c, p. 125)

The Standard English version of the directions present a more formal tone conducive to written Standard English texts. The use of directions in Standard English suggests the written text structure students must master (Baratz, 1969). Except for the contractions, this example represents the linguistic patterns of written Standard English; however, the language is still more informal than formal. The use of the pronoun “you” personalizes the directions; thus the student may have felt that the writer is speaking directly to him or her. This affirms the designers’ goal of valuing the students’ language and culture.

Word-bridging Lessons

The word-bridging lessons provide students with activities to improve their vocabulary and translate word meaning between Black English and Standard English. In these lessons, students compare the word usage in Black English and Standard English; the stories aid students in defining word meanings in both dialects. For example, students might define the word “good” in Black English, based on the context of the story, to mean “bad” or “good.” However, in Standard English the word “good” only means “good” (Simpkins et al., 1977b). The Black English meaning of “bad” is demonstrated in the stories *Shine* and *Stagolee*. *Shine* is “bad” as in “good”; he is a good hero. *Stagolee* is “bad” as in a person who is bad in behavior. Further, he is “bad” as in “good,” because he is a good legendary character.

Word bridging parallels words and phrases in Black English to Standard English synonyms. Through this strategy, students begin to learn semantic patterns and systems of language use. This switching from one language to another might be described as “dialect shifting” (Green, 2011, p. 8); dialect shifting or code switching has been perceived as a positive correlation in the reading achievement of African American students (Craig & Washington, 2006).

Feedback Records

Feedback records provide students with an individualized self-assessment tool. Students compete with themselves versus other students. Their relearning process is allowed to redevelop. The feedback records monitor student responses to the story questions and the skills lessons. (These are separate feedback record sheets.) For example, a student tracks their progress in the Story Questions by completing a set of ten questions related to the story *Shine*. The teacher corrects their answers and the number of correct answers is indicated on a sheet (Figure 12.21). The teacher circles the number of correct responses and students monitor their achievement by acknowledging the higher numbered scores (Simpkins et al., 1977a).

The feedback record can be considered a self-monitoring system for students. It provides students with an internal record of their academic progress without penalty.

Teacher's Guide

The teacher's guide covers the role of the teacher and Peer Control Reading. The designers sought to get students' attention, create interaction, limit direct instruction, and establish a personal relationship between students and teacher (as learning consultant).

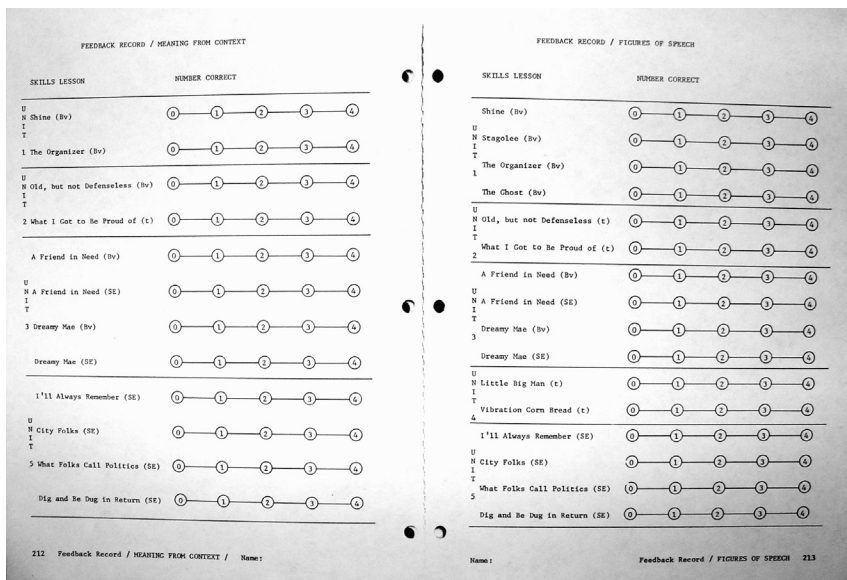


FIGURE 12.21 Feedback Records, Study Book.

Source: Simpkins et al., 1977c, p. 213.

The Teacher's Role

In *Bridge*, the teacher's role is clearly defined and specific to the learning needs of students. The teacher is identified as "manager of classroom behavior, manager of materials and individual learning consultant" (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 18).

As manager of classroom behavior, the teacher directs the establishment of a positive environment for learning and an atmosphere for success and, as much as possible, ignores inappropriate behavior. The teacher contributes to the development of positive self-images by "consistently and exclusively" following two techniques: "(1) rule setting and (2) positive reinforcement of successful behavior" (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 18). The rule setting sets up a pattern that students consistently follow and the teacher consistently reinforces. Positive reinforcement is viewed as the teacher praising or rewarding any and all accomplishments of all her students. This reinforcement improves students' self-image and motivates them to complete assignments (Simpkins et al., 1977b).

The teacher as manager of materials maintains an organized sequence of the reading program. She consistently manages the location of the materials throughout the day and monitors student progress.

Finally, the teacher as individual learning consultant provides individualized instruction, support, reinforcement, or encouragement to students as she circulates the room. The teacher consults with students as learning issues arise (Simpkins et al., 1977b).

The designers worked to provide a reading program that was "teacher proof." Simpkins clarified these beliefs:



Now what do I mean by teacher proof. I meant that I wanted the program where teachers couldn't FUCK IT UP! Okay. So this program is designed for any teacher who could read. You don't have to have any special instructions, background or training. If you can read, follow the instructions, you can teach the program. Okay. We encouraged them to not deviate from the program but to follow it to the letter. And that's what we encouraged all the teachers to do—no special instructions just follow the program. And it worked out really good. So we changed the teacher's role from the teacher who hovers over the class, who also talks too much, who doesn't distribute reinforcement equally to a manager of materials, a dispenser of reinforcements, so the teacher's role now is an

individual learning consultant. The teacher roams around the class. She never addresses the entire group.... she gives them instruction on how to run the program—how to stay on track. She individually helps kids with problems.... We emphasize that we want a distribution of reinforcement. You know every time you use three negatives we want you to use 3 positives. And part of it is, if this kid only stays in his seat for 5 minutes, seek him out when he stays in for 6 minutes and reinforce him for that 6 minutes.

(personal communication, 1999)

Teacher-proofing instructional materials can be a difficult task; however, *Bridge* sought to limit teacher bias, attitudes, and prejudices. The designers attempted to control human interference that often hinders learning for black youth; thereby creating autonomous learners.

Peer Control Reading

Peer Control Reading exemplifies another skills-based component to the design of *Bridge*. The stories in Peer Control Reading differ from those in Reading Booklets One through Four, and they are also written in the three versions—Black English, Transition, and Standard English. In Peer Control Reading, groups of students “reinforce each other for desired oral reading responses” (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 26). Groups are chosen based on reading ability and then randomly selected to read. One person is the “Reader,” and the others in the group are the “Correctors.” The Reader reads a number of sentences. Then, the Reader is stopped if they make any “oral reading errors” (i.e., omissions, substitutions, mistakes in word recognition) and given a chance to identify and correct the error (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 28). If an error is made, the Reader continues reading a few more sentences until the oral reading errors are flawless. In addition, during the Peer Control Reading, the Reader is asked to talk about what they read. The Correctors stop the Reader at errors in comprehension and assist the Reader in understanding the passage (Simpkins et al., 1977b).

Peer Control Reading provides a social environment for students to learn. Students work collaboratively, interact socially, and support each other. It draws upon the “call and response—oral tradition in the black community” (Simpkins, 1976, p. 61). Simpkins stated in his interview: “teachers told us that the peer control group was so much fun that it was hard for them to resist getting into the groups themselves.” Peer Control Reading provides a format for the execution of a culture-specific instructional strategy and implementation. The oral tradition of “call and response” can be experienced in Black churches today; thereby the instructional strategy is authenticated by this culture-specific tradition.

Audio Recordings

The audio recordings launch the program, introduce a story, narrate an entire story, or review a skills lesson. The introduction to each section begins with a flighty and fun musical arrangement. The narrator is male; however, some transitions and stories present a female narrator. All the content in the audio recordings, spoken in Black English, connects to the social, cultural, and linguistic traditions in many black communities. The narrator begins the program with an enticing introduction:



What's happening, Brothers and Sisters! I want to tell you about this here program call Bridge: A Cross-Culture Reading Program. Now I know you thinking that this is just another one of them jive reading programs and that I won't be needing no reading program, but dig it. This here reading program is really kinda different. It was done by a Brother and two Sisters, soul folk you know, and they put sumpin extra in it for ya. They put a little taste of soul. As a matter of fact, a lotta soul. No jive, that's what they put in it. A little bit of soul, something you can relate to.

(Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 47)

In this excerpt, the narrator welcomes the students with a communal greeting, “what’s happening.” Then the narrator addresses the students as “Brothers and Sisters” thereby signifying that they are members of the same community—the same family. This clues students into listening, because they hear familiar greetings that are used socially in their community. Further, the narrator’s intonations and style of speaking are characteristic of some black communities in the 1970s.

Immediately, the narrator addresses student concerns about the reading program and offers the assurance that this program is different from their traditional reading materials. The narrator acknowledges that the program was created by black people like themselves. Usually students do not know the creators of the instructional materials they read. For most students, this was probably their first time reading something written in Black English, and it was highly likely that these students never interacted with instructional materials made by and for black people. The narrator offers the learner something they have never received in instructional materials or even at school before: “a little taste of soul.” They define soul as “referring to Blacks and their culture: a way to describe such cultural

conventions as food, music, dance, and [a] world view of Blacks” (Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 57). The students’ culture is affirmed and supported.

The program introduction continues:

Now, I know what you gonna say: “I don’t need to be reading no better. I get by. I don’t dig no reading and there ain’t nothing I wanna be reading no how.” But dig, I know where you been and I know where you coming from too. When you were just starting school, reading got on your case, didn’t it? Got down on you. Hurt your feelings. Then the second grade, reading just smack you all upside your head and dared you to do something about it. In the third grade (mmmm!) reading got into your chest, knock you down, drag you through the mud, sent you home crying to your mama. Now, by the time you got to the fourth grade, you just about had enough of messing around with this here reading thing, and you say to yourself, “I ain’t gonna be messing with this old bad boy no more.” You just hung it up.
(*Simpkins et al., 1977b, p. 47*)

In this excerpt of the program introduction, the designers have given a scenario of what happens in the structure of schools and schooling. Schools have always been political institutions, because they control what people know and how much they know. The statement “When you were just starting school, reading got on your case, didn’t it? Got down on you. Hurt your feelings” alludes to the fact that academic failure and loss of motivation for learning begins in the early grades. According to Labov (1995), “it is not accidental that the person addressed is in the fourth grade (though the program ... was first tested in grades 7 to 12), since as noted above it is in the fourth grade that resistance to school instruction is first solidified by adolescent peer groups” (p. 51). Then, as it is now, public schools remain paralyzed in a battle to educate the poor and disenfranchised.

This last excerpt addresses the language needs of black youth, who communicate in their homes and community using Black English, and then moves into an explanation of Standard English.

[I]n this here program, you start off with what we call soul talk. You know, the way you hear a lot of Bloods talk. We call this talk Black Vernacular. You got that? Soul talk and Black Vernacular is the same thing. And you end up in Standard English. Now you know what Standard English is don’t you? That’s what you see in them textbooks, what you hear on radio and TV, and the way you hear the teacher talk, and stuff like that. You know?

(*Simpkins et al., 1977b, pp. 47–48*)

In this example, the learner is made aware of the learning goals of the program. They are informed that there is a distinction between what they speak at home

(everyday talk), school (school talk) (Leaverton, 1973), and the dialects heard in the media.

Bridge is based on the premise that language should be learned in its social and cultural context. A child must be able to see and understand the grammatical structure in their own language to make an easy transition to Standard English. Only through explicit written text and oral communication can students determine how Standard English differs from the dialects they use at home, school, or work, and when writing, reading, or speaking.

***Bridge's* Dormancy**

Reactions to *Bridge* varied across audiences. According to linguist Geneva Smitherman, “the vociferous denunciation of *Bridge* (which included letters and calls to the publisher) by Black school superintendents and other members of the Black middle class pounded the nail into the coffin of the series” (Alim, 2012, p. 373). Those people who had the opportunity to talk with the designers or interact with the program had positive experiences, and those who did not have these experiences but who heard the words “Black English” responded negatively. Simpkins stated that *Newsweek* magazine responded positively to the experimental version of the program (Sheils & Manning, 1976) and wrote an article that hailed *Bridge* as:



a major break through for black inner city kids in reading ... Anyway, after *Newsweek* came out with the article everybody and their brother responded to it, that Black English should not be used in the schools. [They stated that] it was a conspiracy—we were trying to keep the kids backwards. And it had no place in education and so on and so forth. And as a result many of the schools backed out from ordering the program. And the sales were lousy because it had so much negative publicity.

(personal communication, 1999)

The stigma associated with Black English and speakers of Black English (Dillard, 1972) roared across the black community and the country. In 1969, linguists anticipated this negative outcry and thereby curtailed further development of dialect readers (Stewart, 1969; Wolfram & Fasold, 1969). Other notions on the development of dialect readers proposed the need to test public opinion before bringing dialect readers into instructional designs (Rickford & Rickford, 1995).

In Simpkins' interview he recalled the following:



[W]hat was most discouraging was to hear from blacks who obviously knew little about language and much less about children—to quote Labov. As they sprouted on and on about the evils of using Black English because they have a concept of Black English that is the street black who is hip and all of that sprouting out hip clichés which when we talk about Black English we include the whole population. Black English is the way my grandmother talked, the way my mama talked. It's the way many of the teachers talk when they get a few drinks in them at a party or something. [Laughing.] You know, so Black English covered the whole realm of black people not just a small segment of hip little gangsters in the street or anything like that.



I have talked to parents all over the country in terms of community. I've yet to talk to any community of parents that did not wholeheartedly support the program in the effort once they knew what the program was about. You know, when we talk to community people and we explain to them what it's about, they become big advocates of the program. And so there is no resistance on the community level. The resistance that we were running into was more on the black middle class—upper class levels, but that's the black professionals who because of their own up bringing and their... perceived need to escape from lower level culture have certain attitudes about the language.

But the thing is I went around the country and talked to some of the kids that were in the program, in the schools (with conviction) and the kids loved the program. For the first time in their lives, they were interested in reading. They found it to be fun.

(personal communication, 1999)

The reactions of the black middle-class community, the coverage of indifferent publicity, and negative comments by officials in education dampened

the marketability of *Bridge*. Williams (1976) argued that it has been the black middle class who have “attempted to define the Black experience in terms of ... Black street culture” (p. 15). Blacks who are ashamed or antagonistic about Black English may prevent its use in the school curriculum, as was the case with *Bridge*.

The lack of knowledge about the program’s goal and objectives of the designers harmed the success of this reading program. People were not knowledgeable about the language and learning needs of young people, and in particular of black youth. They were fearful of what Black English symbolized and sought no explanation. “The publishers received enough objections from parents and teachers to the use of AAVE [African American Vernacular English] in the classroom that they ceased promoting it [*Bridge*], and further development was shelved” (Labov, 1995, p. 52).

The Future of *Bridge*

Houghton Mifflin field-tested *Bridge* in 1975 at schools in Chicago, Illinois; Phoenix, Arizona; Washington, DC; Memphis, Tennessee and Macon County, Alabama. *Bridge* replaced a previously planned remedial reading program. The participants included 540 students of which 520 were Black and were enrolled in 27 classes. The same teacher taught the experimental and control group. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills in Reading Comprehension measured pre- and post-reading scores. In the seventh to twelfth grades, the experimental groups exhibited a mean gain in grade equivalency scores at 6.2 months for 4.0 months of instruction compared to control groups that earned 1.6 months for 4.0 months of instruction (Simpkins, 2002). Questionnaires of participating teachers revealed the following responses: “Even my chronic trouble-makers are willing to listen to directions and remain on task” and “The stories reminded students of their families” (Simpkins, 1976, p. 130). Student interest was sustained in reading the three different versions; however, teachers were mixed about whether there should be three versions (i.e., Black English, Transition, Standard English).

In 2001, Brookline Books, a private publishing company, revived the series as *Bridge 2: A Cross-Cultural Reading Program*. This version updated the stories from *Bridge* and expanded the cross-cultural approach (Simpkins, 2002). The authors of this version included Gary Simpkins, Geneva Smitherman, and Charlesetta Stalling. *Bridge 2* was never distributed or produced widely. It remains dormant.

Conclusion

Examinations of educational technologies must be presented within their historical, political, and social contexts. *Bridge* was designed by and for African Americans at a time when Black power and liberation were at the forefront of people’s thoughts, words, and deeds. Subsequently, other instructional materials designed

during this time emanated out of circumstance, condition, or just simple competition. By example, the Education Study Center in Washington, DC under the direction of William Stewart and Joan Baratz produced three experimental readers—*Ollie*, *Friends*, and *Old Tales* (Wolfram & Fasold, 1969)—that contained Black English and Standard English versions. Although the integration of black dialect into instructional materials was uncommon, authentic examples of educational technologies that represented the black experience in K–12 education were being produced by publishers such as The Free Press (NY) and Afro-American Publishing (IL).

Bridge represents a unique effort in the history of African American educational technologies. This exemplifies a culture-specific design (Young, 2008, 2009) that sought to intervene in the academic future of African American youth. It is a testament to the continuing fact that the value of educating African American youth remains unbalanced.

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Note

- 1 This chapter contains audio material accessible by scanning the individual QR codes for each segment.

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