

The Magic of Popular Songs: A Case Study of Music Mediated Early Language Development

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Abstract

This article reports on an ethnographic study of the acquisition of language skills of a Chinese young girl. Using the notion of playful learning and mediation theory as theoretical framework, this inquiry explores how the experiences of Chinese popular songs in the domain of home contribute to children's language learning. Through an examination of the music participation of the Chinese young girl, this study reveals what language skills are fostered, and in what ways these language skills are developed. The language skills developed through music participation are reflected in print-based language tasks. It is suggested by the study that popular songs be integrated into family language education as one of the myriad ways that household supports children's early language development.

Key words: Popular songs; Mediation; Playful learning; Early language development

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INTRODUCTION

Parents are often reminded that if they read to their children every night, their children will grow up to be readers, tend to love literature, and most likely experience academic success in school. There are many studies to

back up the claim that reading to children has a positive effect on reading achievement and language ability later in life (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992; Edwards, 2004; Morrow, 2001; Wells, 1985). For instance, bed time reading is an indicator of children's language development and cognitive styles (Heath, 1982). Storytelling has a predictive value on the development of children's narrative production as one facet of children's language development (Stavans & Goldzweig, 2008). Hence, parents are encouraged to read regularly to their children from the time children are very young. Although the importance of parent-child reading has been documented, it is not a universal practice. Parents' literacy habits and levels affect their beliefs and attitudes about children's literacy and language development; and parental reading beliefs are associated with the types of literacy and language activities that parents engage in with their children (DeBaryshe, 1995). Parents who place less value on reading may provide less support for children's literacy and language development through reading. Mui and Anderson suggest that parents and educators "think more broadly and inclusively about family literacy" (2008, p.234). Hence, it is necessary to explore the multiple pathways to language development.

In this case study, I present popular songs as a variation of the ways in which families engage in and support children's early language development. Building on the notion of playful learning, I discuss the advantage of music participation in young children's language development, and suggest an alternative perspective to language learning in the early childhood. Employing the theory of mediation, I illustrate how the experiences and activities of popular songs at home mediate to foster children's language skills, and propose an incorporation of popular songs into family language education for young children.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Playful Learning

Educational practices need an integration of play and playfulness (Wood, 2010). On the one hand, play is an indispensable part of our childhood. It is “the leading source of development in preschool years” (Vygotsky, 1967, P. 6). When children play in an environment filled with learning resources, they become familiar with the uses of literacy (Brooker, 2010). On the other hand, the need to be playful is essential to children’s intellectual growth, and “being playful allows children to ensure that an activity is meaningful to them” (Ring, 2010, p.114). Thus it is important to make a child perceive an activity as play and consequently take a playful approach, as this helps harness intrinsic qualities such as motivation, enthusiasm, self-preservation, willingness and engagement (Howard, 2002).

Music participation integrates play and playfulness. Music participation itself is a kind of play for children. Children enjoy the melody, move their bodies along with the song’s rhythm, and make sense of the story contained in lyrics. Meanwhile, music participation is a playful learning process, because it “allows for repetition that is not perceived as drill” (Standley, 2008, p.29). Teachers have reported children learn when they engage in playful music activities (McIntire, 2007). Music nurtures such abilities related to language learning as auditory discrimination ability, phonemic and phonological awareness (Anvari, Trainor, Woodside & Levy, 2002; Lathroum, 2011), orthographic awareness (Dugan, 1996; Standley & Hughes, 1997), sight word identification (Register, 2001; Standley & Hughes, 1997), and vocabulary (Madsen, 1991). In addition, music fosters children’s comprehension ability (Colwell, 1994; Fisher, 2001) as “song lyrics contain elements of reading comprehension and practice for visual decoding skills” (Standley, 2008, p.29). In this sense, music creates an inviting environment that engages children in reading-related tasks and assists their language learning in a playful way.

1.2 Music as Mediation

Vygotsky (1978) points out that higher forms of human mental activity are always mediated by symbolic means. Intentional learning that involves complicated higher cognitive processes is always mediated by symbolic means (Lantolf, 1994). With regard to language learning, usually the “initially unfocused language learning may become adjusted and modified based on how the learning is mediated” (Donato & McCormick, 1994, p.456). Mediation can take various forms, including audio and visual materials (Donato and McCormick, 1994). Music, transmitted in both audio and visual form, can naturally be one of the symbolic means to mediate language acquisition.

Research has generally shown a positive relation between music and reading. Standley (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 empirical studies using a variety of music interventions to improve reading skills. The results demonstrate that music designed to teach reading activities is generally effective in improving reading ability, and the benefits of music experience are greatest in the pre-school years. Findings from these studies indicate that music can be used as mediation for children’s language learning, in particular in early childhood. Since home is where most early-aged children spend most of their time, it is worthwhile exploring how language learning might be promoted in the home domain with music as mediation, and what language skills can be developed.

2. CONTEXT

Sarah is a 4-year-and-10-month-old Chinese girl who loves listening to Chinese popular songs, watching music videos, singing and dancing to the music. Both of Sarah’s parents finished their 3-year college education. They are running their own business at the moment. Partly due to their busy work and partly out of personal reading habits, Sarah’s parents seldom read at home except that Sarah’s father sometimes reads online fictions via cellphones and ipad. Like many other families in China, Sarah’s grandparents live with them and help take care of Sarah when Sarah’s parents are at work. They provide great help in Sarah’s early education, particularly before she starts to go to the kindergarten at the age of 3.5. Born into a family that loves music, Sarah has been immersed in a music environment since she was two months old.

Before 1.5 year old, she mainly listened to children’s songs and a small proportion of Chinese popular songs; after that Sarah was allowed to watch music videos on the television. Between 1.5 and 2.5 years old, Sarah started learning to sing when she was listening to songs, and she managed to capture a stretch of song lyrics. When Sarah was 2.5 years old, her parents found that she had been able to recognize quite a number of Chinese characters that none of the family members taught her before. Sarah’s parents and grandparents did not notice when she started to know the first words.

Between 2.5 and 3.5 years old, the frequency that Sarah listened to songs or watched music videos at home increased to at least four to five days a week. For a long period within this year, she even watched music videos every day. When watching music videos, Sarah would communicate with her parents and grandparents about the story in the music videos, and ask about the pronunciation and meaning of certain words. However, this kind of interaction did not happen quite often, because usually Sarah watched music videos attentively. She made progress to be able to sing at least several successive sentences of a song. At this stage, Sarah was able to

recognize Chinese characters in public places, read out short messages in adults' cellphones, and headlines on the newspapers. When asked how she recognized a certain word, sometimes Sarah could tell where she encountered this word before, or related it to other phrases that contain this word, and sometimes she could not recall how she learned this word.

After 3.5 years old, Sarah did not watch music videos on the television at home as often as before, because most time of the day she was in the kindergarten with teachers and peers. Sarah started to use her parents' cellphones to listen to music when they drove her to and back from kindergarten every morning and afternoon. The cellphones play the music and display the song lyrics on the screen at the same time. Now Sarah is able to sing part of many songs and sing several songs completely if she looks at the lyrics. As to reading, she not only can independently read children's storybooks for her age or a bit beyond her age, but also shows certain comprehension ability. The kindergarten teachers teach some simple words that are already within Sarah's vocabulary repertoire.

3. DATA COLLECTION

This study adopts ethnographic tools of inquiry to address issues of language learning resources, music-mediated language learning activities, and the language skills nurtured through music-mediated activities. Irregular home visits lasted from Sarah's birth to this moment, most of which were done before Sarah was 3.5 years old. The average frequency of home visit is once every two weeks. Besides home visits, telephone conversations and online chats were done from time to time. All the talks were tape-recorded. Furthermore, field notes, informal face-to-face conversations with family members, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews (Appendix A), and photographs of language-related artifacts are to document Sarah's language development. These data were used to generate a detailed understanding of popular music as one of the pathways to gaining language skills.

Additionally, two language tasks (Appendix B) were set out to see whether or not the language skills that are mainly gained from popular songs allow Sarah to identify Chinese characters, interpret word meanings, and comprehend stories in the written form. Considering the young age of Sarah, the tasks were done in two sessions. In the first session, Sarah explained the given vocabulary; and in the second session, the task of reading and comprehension was carried out. Two components of language skills — phonological awareness and word identification, though supported by music experience, were excluded in this study. The significance of phonological awareness in reading non-alphabetic language (e.g. Chinese) is less clear (McBride-Chang & Ho, 2005) and inconclusive. And the word identification

ability can be revealed in the reading task. Due to the spatial restraints, the tasks were done via the internet. I gave the instruction and supervised the conduction of the tasks on the one end of the Internet, while Sarah did the tasks with her mother's necessary assistance on the other end. The tasks were given to Sarah's mother and explicitly explained in advance.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Music as a Playful Pathway to Language Learning

Music participation is regarded by Sarah as a playful activity, in which she images herself as a singer. When she is listening to a new Chinese popular song at the first and second time, she is often totally absorbed into it, ignoring people around her and immersing herself in the world of music. When she listens to the song at the third and fourth time, she spontaneously tries to learn it. If listening for a fifth and sixth time, she will be able to sing several lines. Most of the time, Sarah sings solo, but sometimes she likes antiphonal singing with her father at home.

Holding a microphone, Sarah fixes her eyes at the television screen reading the lyrics, sings and occasionally dances to the karaoke music. Two video clips of the scene of karaoke singing were respectively recorded when Sarah was 3 and 4.5 years old. The lyrics of the two popular songs recorded in the video clips are presented below (Excerpt 1 and Excerpt 2), with the English translation following the Chinese lyrics.

Excerpt 1

《荷塘月色》萤火虫点亮夜的星光，谁为我添一件梦的衣裳，推开那扇心窗远远地望，谁采下那一朵昨日的忧伤，我像只鱼儿在你的荷塘，只为和你守候那皎白月光，游过了四季荷花依然香，等你宛在水中央。

Moonlight over the Lotus Pond: The fireflies lighten up the starry night. Who can light up my dream? Open up my mind and let go of my melancholy. I am like a fish swimming in your lotus pond. I just wish to share the clear and bright moonlight with you. The fragrance of the lotus still lingers. I am waiting for the lotus to bloom in the pond.

This is one of the songs that Sarah sings best. At the age of 3, she could sing most of this song along with the melody and utter every word clearly.

Excerpt 2

《第一次爱的人》灰色的天你的脸，爱过也哭过笑过痛过之后只剩再见，我的眼泪湿了脸，失去第一次爱的人竟然是这种感觉，总以为爱是全部的心跳，失去爱我们就要就要一点点慢慢的死掉，当我失去你那一秒心突然就变老，the day you went away，喧闹的街没发现我的泪被遗忘在街角，the day you went away。

My First Lover: The sky looks dark. We loved each other, we used to cry and laugh together. We caused pain

to each other, and now we have to separate. Tears dampened my cheeks. I knew the feelings of losing my first love. I assumed that fast heart-beating meant love. I thought we would die without love. The moment I lost you, my mind turned blank. The day you went away, I cried silently in the corner of the boisterous street. Nobody noticed me shedding tears.

This is Sarah's favorite song. If lyrics are provided, she is almost able to sing the whole song by reading the lyrics. Most words are pronounced accurately except the English words.

Many of the popular songs Sarah listens to and sings seem too "mature" for Sarah. For instance, the lyrics of *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* are too abstract and literary for young children to understand; and the feelings expressed in *My First Lover* are unrelated to children. To know the reason why Sarah has an interest in them, a brief interview was done (Interview 1).

Interview 1 [R = researcher; S = Sarah]

R: Sarah, why do you like the song *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*?

S: Because there is lotus pond in the music video. I want to see what a lotus pond looks like.

R: Then why do you like *My First Lover*?

S: I want to watch it again after I first watched the music video.

R: What do you like about it?

S: I like the dance performance in the music video.

The interview shows that the music itself might not be the reason that motivates a child to listen to and learn a song. Instead, the scene and the performance shown in the music video can be potential factors to attract children's interest. With pleasant melody, music videos are interesting and relaxing for children. Compared with books that are presented in still images, music videos presented in the form of fluid images are more likely to draw children's attention.

Sarah's attitude towards popular songs and book reading was also investigated (Interview 2).

Interview 2 [R = researcher; S = Sarah]

R: Do you like reading?

S: I don't like it very much.

R: What about watching music videos? Do you like singing songs?

S: I superbly like it.

R: Whose songs do you like best?

S: Cyndi Wang.

R: Which of her songs is your favorite?

S: *My First Lover*.

R: Why do you like watching music videos?

S: I want to be a star when I grow up.

R: Then why don't you like reading?

S: It's not interesting. It's not as interesting as playing games or going to the amusement park.

R: But you can learn Chinese characters through reading.

S: I just don't like it.

R: Okay. When you are singing karaoke, do you read the lyrics?

S: Yes.

R: Do you know those words?

S: Yes, I know them.

In the interview, Sarah explicitly expresses her love of Chinese popular songs and lack of interest in reading. Her interest in popular songs is evidenced by her naming of her favorite singer and song. And her engagement in popular songs is motivated by her dream to be a star, while her rejection of reading is attributed to its boredom. Though word identification is demanded for reading the lyrics when singing, music participation is thought by Sarah as nothing to do with word-learning but only play. She adopts a playful approach to it, believing that these music activities are meaningful for her dream. In this sense, music participation stimulates her motivation, enthusiasm, self-preservation, willingness and engagement (Howard, 2002).

Sarah is enticed by the popular songs to gain language skills when she thinks she is just singing and playing. Darrow points out that "the magic of music can entice a child to practice various reading-related tasks, often with the child even being aware of the learning objective" (2008, p.32). Sarah might be too young to be aware that music participation is an alternative to reading to gain language skills in her case. This unawareness is reflected in the interview when I mentioned that reading allows her to learn Chinese characters. Sarah could have answered that she had learned a lot of Chinese characters through watching music videos. It is possible that she defines singing as play, while reading is serious learning in her eyes. Sarah's unawareness of learning through popular songs is also manifested in daily life when she automatically associates certain words with music videos. In Interview 3, Sarah tells about how she identified certain words in the tasks.

Interview 3 [R = researcher; S = Sarah]

R: Sarah, can you tell me how did you learn the word 郁 (pronounced *yu*)? Where did you see it before?

S: It was the surname of 郁可唯 (Yu Kewei).

R: Yes, it's true. What about the word 摇 (row)?

S: 摇到外婆桥 (*Rowing to Grandma's Bridge*).

When asked to recall how she first learned the word 郁, Sarah related this word to the surname of a female pop singer Yu Kewei, who gained fame in China from the influential singing competition Super Girl. According to Sarah's mother, Sarah may have learned this word by watching Yu Kewei's performance on the television, where Yu's name was shown. As to the word 摇, Sarah refers to a well-known children's song 摇到外婆桥.

4.2 Popular Songs As Resource For Acquiring Language Skills

There are many music videos on DVD in Sarah's home.

Music TV programs and the Internet also offer easy accesses to popular songs. Portable music players and cellphones make it possible to listen to songs at any time and in any place. There are children's books in Sarah's home, but parent-child reading seldom happens there. Sometimes Sarah does independent reading, but generally she reads her storybooks only once or twice and then leaves them aside. The interview with Sarah's mother illustrates Sarah's reading habits from her parents' observation.

Interview 4 [R = researcher; M = Sarah's mother]

R: Do you often do parent-child reading at home? I mean, you read to Sarah, or Sarah reads to you, or you share a book together.

M: We seldom do that.

R: Why?

M: Sarah doesn't like reading very much. No matter it is that we read to her or that we read a book together.

R: How do you know that?

M: She's not so concentrated, not as concentrated when she's watching music videos. And sometimes she would even explicitly refuse us reading to her.

R: Did you ever try to read books to Sarah?

M: Of course. But she does not like it.

R: Why do you think she does not like it?

M: Probably because of its structured form.

R: Does she read on her own at home?

M: Quite rarely.

Sarah's parents and grandparents seldom read stories to her, partly because Sarah has shown a great interest in music since she was very young. She could use the stereo to play the songs by herself whenever she wanted to listen to them. The other reason is that Sarah does not have much interest in reading. When asked about why they think Sarah does not like reading, Sarah's mother attributed it to the structured form of reading. The interview with Sarah's mother, together with Sarah's statement above, shows that on the one hand reading is not the main resource for the developing language skills in Sarah's case, and on the other hand playfulness is of great importance in children's language education.

Although there is a dearth of storybook reading at home, Sarah engages in a variety of music-mediated activities that offer ample opportunities to develop language skills. Admittedly, Chinese popular songs are the primary but not the only literacy resource for Sarah. As the single child, she interacts a lot with family members and the extended family. She is exposed to other forms of literature resources such as public signs and outdoor advertisements. The interaction and exposure also provide resources and opportunities to foster her language development.

Sarah's frequent exposure to music allows the recurrent words in the song lyrics to be comprehensible linguistic input for building vocabulary. Some of the vocabulary is alternative to the words that Sarah has already known, and is enhanced later when it is used in daily life. For instance, the word 荷塘 (lotus pond, pronounced *he tang*) from the song *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* enriches Sarah's vocabulary as an alternative to the phrase 荷花池 (lotus pond, pronounced *he hua chi*), which is already part of her vocabulary. When a lotus pond is shown in the music video, and the sounds *he tang* appear together with the image, Sarah absorbs this new phrase and understands that it refers to the same thing as *he hua chi*. Thus, when she sees lotus pond in real life, she has at least two terms to refer to it. Moreover, lyrics also offer vocabulary that Sarah is less likely to encounter in her interaction with parents and grandparents. There are examples from Excerpt 1 and Excerpt 2: the word 忧伤 (melancholy, formal) is quite less often used than the informal word 伤心 (sad, informal) in a child's world; similarly, 遗忘 (losing one's memory, formal) may not be part of a pre-school child's linguistic repertoire, because synonyms 忘, 忘记, 忘掉 (forget, informal) are what people usually use in oral language.

In addition to enlarging vocabulary, music videos provide abundant linguistic input in both audio and visual form that may benefit the acquisition of three other language skills: sound-form correspondence, text decoding, and comprehension. When Sarah is watching music videos, she is possibly doing three things simultaneously: Listening to the rhythm of music and the sound of the lyrics; getting to know the print form of the lyrics that are displayed at the bottom of the screen along with the vocal singing; watching the moving images that illustrate the story of the song. In this process, sound-form correspondence, text decoding, and comprehension are involved. Sound-form correspondence happens when Sarah is listening to the song while identifying the Chinese characters of the lyrics. Text decoding is demanded when Sarah relates the identified Chinese characters to the moving images. Comprehension is achieved when the lyrics are successfully decoded and when the story shown by the moving images is understood. The sound-form matching helps Sarah learn Chinese characters and enlarge her vocabulary; the images give the context for understanding vocabulary and comprehending the lyrics. Take a snapshot of the music video of *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* (Figure 1) as an example. The sound *he hua* in the audio form, the print form 荷花 (lotus) at the bottom, together with the image of the lotus in the visual image work together for the acquisition of the words 荷花.

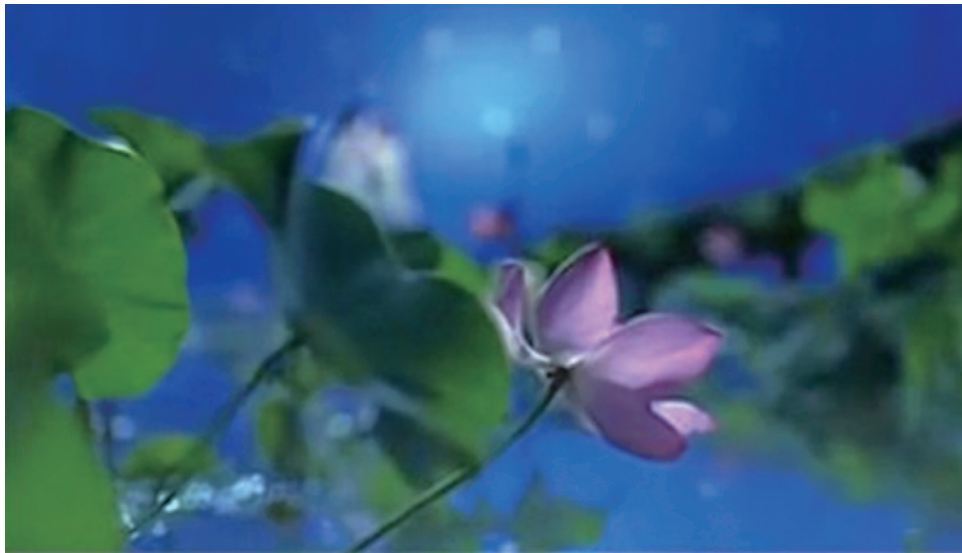


Figure 1

4.3 Language Skills Demonstrated in Language Tasks Vocabulary Task

The vocabulary task is employed to see whether or not the vocabulary introduced by Chinese popular songs is understood by Sarah and becomes part of her linguistic repertoire.

In this task, Sarah was asked to verbally explain 30 two-character words, covering nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Some of the words are from her familiar songs. Sarah identified all the words in print and succeeded in explaining 28 words, except 忧伤 (melancholy) and 慌张 (panic). The word 忧伤 (melancholy) is taken from the song *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*, but Sarah seemed not to understand it and could not produce an explanation. For the rest of the words, Sarah used the following strategies to explain: synonym, hyponymy, metaphor, description and elaboration, example, and acting out. Representative words and Sarah's explanations are given below.

[R = researcher; M = Sarah's mother]

R: Sarah, can you explain the word 遗忘 (losing one's memory, formal)?

S: 搞忘了 (forget, informal).

R: What is the meaning of 运动 (doing sports)?

S: 跑步, 打羽毛球, 还有..... (Running, playing badminton, and ...)

R: 鸟窝 (nest)?

S: 鸟窝是鸟儿的温暖的家 (Nest is the cozy home of birds).

R: What about 发芽 (sprout)?

S: 树子长高了, 我的种子发芽了 (The tree grows taller. My seeds sprout).

R: What does 迷路 (losing one's way) means?

S: 我好害怕哦, 找不到回家的路了, 打110 (I'm scared. I can't find the way back home. I'll dial 110).

R: Please explain the word 惊奇 (surprise).

S: Sarah made facial expression to show her surprise.

To explain the word 遗忘 (forget, formal), Sarah used a synonym 搞忘 (forget, colloquial). When asked how she learned this word, Sarah mentioned the song *My First Lover*, from which the word 遗忘 (losing one's memory, formal) is taken. Then when asked what nest is, Sarah could not explain it in meta-language like "a hollow place or structure that a bird makes or chooses for laying its eggs and sheltering its young" (Hornby, 2004, p.1159). However, she knows what is nest for birds is what is home for her. She projected her own attitudes towards home to the explanation of "nest" and used metaphor as explanation. To explain the word 发芽 (sprout), Sarah not only offered the natural phenomenon of trees growing up as an example, but also referred to her own real-world experience of seeing her seeds sprout. This shows that she is able to connect abstract concepts with the reality. When explaining 迷路 (losing one's way), Sarah not just explicitly defined it as "can't find the way back home", but described the feeling of fear that is usually associated with losing one's way. She even gave the solution by proposing dialing 110 to get help from policemen. The combination of example and elaboration as a strategy to explain "losing one's way" shows her good understanding of this word. When language is insufficient for explaining an abstract word like 惊奇 (surprise), Sarah chose to act out through making facial expressions, which again shows that she knows the meaning of this word.

Sarah's performance in the vocabulary task indicates that she has built up a certain amount of vocabulary repertoire in both spoken form and written form, and she is able to identify those words and use diverse strategies to interpret them. However, her vocabulary knowledge is not fully development yet. Even some words from her familiar songs but seldom used in everyday life, like 忧伤 (melancholy), are currently beyond her understanding.

Therefore, mere exposure to linguistic input by music videos without real life communication practice may be inadequate to develop children's language ability.

Reading and comprehension task

Reading and comprehension task is used to see whether or not the decoding skills and comprehension ability involved in music participation can be successfully used in reading.

In this task, Sarah was given a story named *Little Mouse's Amusement Park*, which is about a little mouse building up an amusement park for his peers with vegetables, fruits, sticks, strings and other tools. Sarah read this 592-Chinese-word story within 9.5 minutes. The average speed is 62.3 words per minute. Throughout the whole passage, there are four words that Sarah could not recognize: 像 (look like), 咯吱 (crunch) and 列 (row). And two words were reversed in Sarah's reading: 要先 (pronounced *yao xian*) was read as 先要 (pronounced *xian yao*), and 半个 (pronounced *ban ge*) was read as 个半 (pronounced *ge ban*). Repetition and short pauses were frequently used by Sarah when she was trying to identify words. Self-correction also appeared quite often, which shows that Sarah was able to self-monitor what she was reading, and made timely correction. What is interesting is that when Sarah read the sentences “小花鼠来到了果园。他摘了一个大大的香蕉。‘香蕉弯弯的真像个小船呀!’” (The mouse went to the orchard. He picked a big banana. ‘The banana is curved, looking like a small boat!’), and “‘我的香蕉秋千做好了!’他高兴得跳起来。” (‘My banana seesaw is done!’ He jumped up excitedly.), she spontaneously moved her arms and used gestures coordinating with the content of the reading, as if she were acting out the story.

After Sarah finished reading the story, questions were asked to check her understanding.

[R = researcher; S = Sarah]

R: What are the recreation facilities in the amusement park?

S: Spaceship, swing, seesaw, and train.

R: What is the seesaw made up of?

S: Melon skin. Watermelon skin.

R: How did the mouse make the melon skin to be a seesaw?

S: The mouse is very smart. He found a long wooden board, and fixed the melon skin on it. Then all the mice played together.

R: And then how did the mouse make the plane? What was used to make the plane?

S: Banana.

R: Banana? How was it made?

S: The mouse peeled off the banana skin. He took a big bite out of it, and made a hole in it.

Generally speaking, Sarah could understand the story and talk about it in her own words. She remembered the main subjects in the story, and recalled the details of how to make seesaw with melon skin. When asked how

the plane was made, Sarah obviously mixed up some information from the story. She may have understood the story when reading it, but her limited cognitive capacity prevented her from reproducing all the details in the way that they are presented in the story.

Sarah's performance in these two tasks suggests that the language skills such as word identification, text decoding and comprehension ability are transferred from her music participation to reading.

CONCLUSION

Sarah's case demonstrates that there are different pathways to language learning for young children, not just storybook reading. Popular songs create a playful learning context where Sarah imperceptibly develops language skills. Music-mediated language learning is an unstructured form that provides a pressure-free atmosphere, and it is effective in stimulating children's intrinsic motivation and willingness to engage. Furthermore, song lyrics provide abundant linguistic resources for Sarah's language development in the home domain. Popular songs presented in the form of music videos offer opportunities for practicing letter-sound correspondence, word identification, vocabulary, text decoding, and reading comprehension.

This study shows that popular songs can be one of the myriad ways that household supports children's early language development, in spite of the prevailing practices of parents reading books to children. However, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other children and families, because Sarah is an example of the children who has intrinsic passion for music, and happens to be born and brought up in a music-rich home environment. Implications can still be drawn from Sarah's case — popular songs have the potential to be one of the pathways to early language development, and that can be incorporated into home language education in early childhood.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions for Sarah's parents and grandparents:

1. When did Sarah start to listen to music?
2. When did Sarah start to watch music video with lyrics on the television/computer?
3. When did Sarah start to sing along with the music?
4. How often does Sarah listen to music?
5. How often does Sarah watch music video?
6. Can you describe how Sarah listens to music and watches the music videos?
7. Do you give any explanation to the music video when Sarah is watching it?
8. Do you give help Sarah learn the lyrics shown on the screen when she is watching the music video?
9. Does Sarah explain the meaning of the music video to you?
10. How often does Sarah read books at home?
11. What kinds of books does Sarah read?
12. How often do you read stories to/share story reading with Sarah?

Interview questions for Sarah:

1. Do you like singing? And why?
2. Do you like reading? And why?
3. Why do you like the songs Moonlight over the Lotus Pond and My first Lover?
4. How do you know the word, for example 咦 (pronounced yi)?
5. What is the meaning of the phrase, for example 勤劳 (diligent)?

APPENDIX B

Vocabulary task

请解释下面的词语。(Please explain the following words.)

朋友	海洋	树林	乌云	礼物	遗忘
玻璃	鸟窝	忧伤	月饼	运动	闪电
网络	飞翔	惊奇	逃跑	凉快	安静
满意	害羞	调皮	凶恶	温暖	慌张
发芽	打扮	购买	分享	迷路	打字

READING AND COMPREHENSION TASK

请读出下面的故事。(Please read aloud the story.)

小花鼠的游乐场

小花鼠很想开一个游乐场。因为小鼠们除了整天呆在洞里，没什么地方可以去。游乐场怎么开呢？小花鼠去问朋友们。“当然需要很多的玩具了，像小火车，跷跷板，秋千了，还有飞船……”大伙儿一下子说出了好多。

“我要先做个跷跷板。”小花鼠这么想着，来到了草地上。咦？这是谁扔的半个瓜皮？有了，小花鼠转转耳朵想了想。他回去找了块木板子，钉在了瓜皮上。小花鼠跳上去站在了中间。哇！瓜皮摇来摇去，一头高一头低。真像个跷跷板呢。

“我要再做个飞机。”小花鼠来到了菜地里。咦？这里有一棵好大的胡萝卜，中间被虫子咬了个好大的洞。小花鼠跳上去，“咯吱咯吱”把那个洞洞咬的好大。最后他自己都可以坐进去了。这不是可以当小飞机吗？他又找了两片叶子，贴在了胡萝卜的两边，正好是两只翅膀啊。

“我还差个秋千。”小花鼠来到了果园。他摘了一个大大的香蕉。“香蕉弯弯的真像个小船呀！”小花鼠找出了两个绳子绑在了香蕉的两头，挂在了树上。“我的香蕉秋千做好了！”他高兴得跳起来。

“还差一列小火车呢。”小花鼠一抬头看见了绿绿的黄瓜架。上面结满了细细长长的黄瓜。“嘿嘿，这些正好可以当火车呀！”小花鼠摘了好多的黄瓜，把他们切成了一段一段的。又找来了许多圆圆的小石子，做成了火车轮子，装了上去。“我的火车要开了。”小花鼠高兴地坐上了自己的小火车。

看呀！小花鼠的游乐场开起来了，小鼠们再也不用闷在黑乎乎的洞里了。他们玩着小花鼠做的玩具，都开心极了！

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